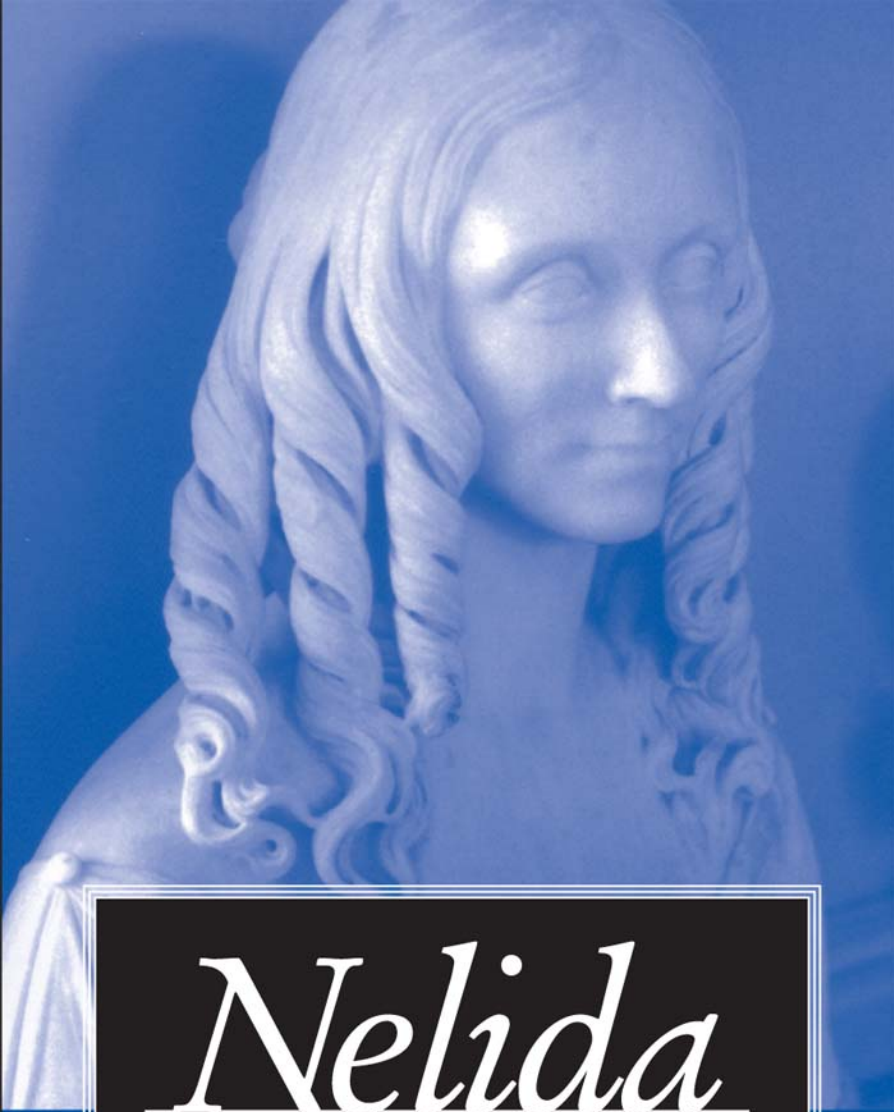

Nelida

MARIE D'AGOULT

Translated by Lynn Hoggard

Nelida

SUNY series, Women Writers in Translation
Marilyn Gaddis Rose, editor

Nelida

Marie d'Agoult

originally published in 1846
under the pen name Daniel Stern

Translated by
Lynn Hoggard

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Illustration 2: *Franz Liszt,* from an 1838 painting by F. Von Amerling. Courtesy Charles Dupêchez.

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Permission to print a photograph of a portrait of Franz Liszt by painter F. Von Amerling was granted by Charles F. Dupêchez.

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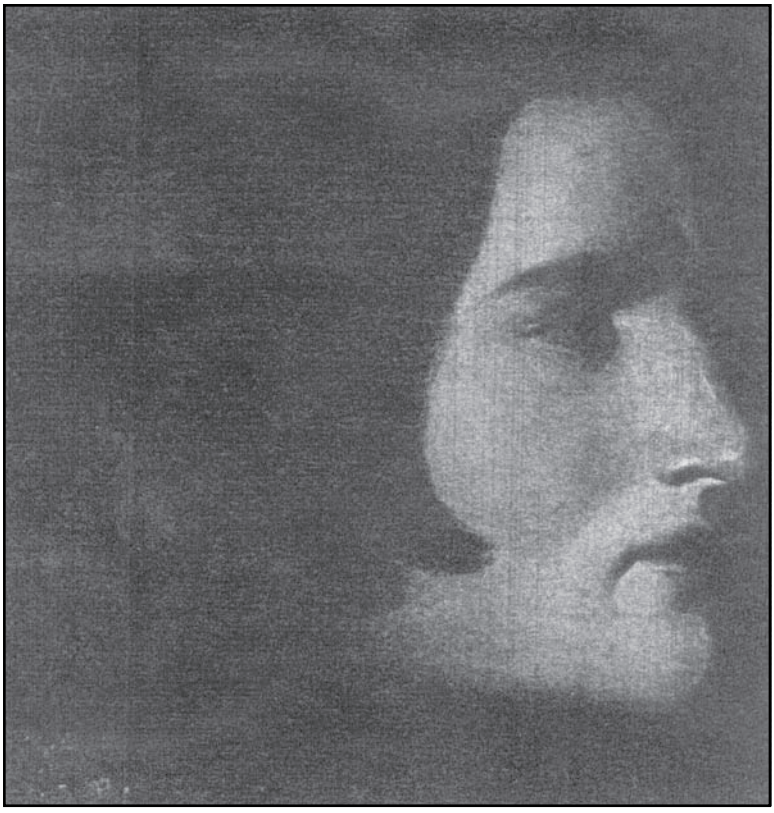
Marie d'Agoult in an 1843 portrait by French painter Henri Lehmann, student of Ingres. (Courtesy Musée Carnalvet, Paris.)



Franz Liszt, from an 1838 painting by F. Von Amerling. (Courtesy Charles Dupêchez.)

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Introduction

Maiden, Lover, Crone: A Sundered Trinity in Marie d'Agoult's *Nelida*

Her novel *Nelida* was the product of Marie d'Agoult's violent attempt to separate her destiny from that of pianist/composer Franz Liszt, who, for more than a decade, had been her soul mate and father to three of her five children. When in 1832 she met and fell passionately in love with Liszt (then twenty-one), Marie, then twenty-seven and mother of two young daughters, was unhappily joined in an arranged marriage to Count Charles d'Agoult. By late 1833 she and Liszt had probably become intimate in what appears to have been a mutually powerful physical, spiritual, and intellectual relationship. Several months after the death of her six-year-old daughter, Louise, in 1834, Marie discovered that she was pregnant with Liszt's child. Rather than save herself and her family from scandal by pretending that the child was her husband's (a not-uncommon practice in such circumstances), she left husband and daughter to become, between the years 1835 and 1840, the artist's muse and companion in love and wandering (*Années de Pèlerinage* [Years of Journeying], was the title Liszt gave the hundreds of pages of music composed during this early and fertile period of his career). One of the couple's three children, Cosima, repeated her mother's example by later leaving her own husband and two children to live with composer Richard

Wagner, whom she eventually married. Marie, however, never married Liszt (the most obvious reason being that divorce in France was then impossible; Marie's husband lived until 1875); instead, she returned alone to Paris at the end of 1839.

Although the two continued to correspond regularly and to see one another periodically, by late 1842 Marie had become convinced that a permanent break must occur. Liszt, not looking for an end to the relationship, at first seemed crushed by the rupture. In the words of d'Agoult biographer, Phyllis Stock-Morton:

> [Liszt] wanted the freedom to take occasional breaks from the close union they had formed, to concertize and make enough to support his children, and return as he chose, to warm himself at the fires of their passion. (p. 64).

Marie, however, saw the situation differently. "I am willing to be your mistress," she had written Liszt in 1843, "but not *one* of your mistresses" (Dupêchez, 164). During the years they spent together, Marie had been intensely hurt by ongoing reports of Liszt's affairs with other women. Yet Liszt did not take seriously Marie's protests of having felt violated and humiliated by these successive and public liaisons (Liszt's views here were perhaps typical of his time; he would later write his daughters that their destiny as women was "to make life sweet and easy for those around" them [Stock-Morton, 158]). Shortly after her breakup with Liszt, Marie wrote bitterly to a friend:

> Liszt wanted to make an easy mistress of me, one more vanity in a life of vanities, a woman good for showing off to others, one to relax with comfortably between two orgies. That role did not suit me; I tried it, so hesitant was I to break with the only being I had loved with passion and grandeur,

> but the feeling at the center of my strength was outraged. . . . (*N.A.F. 25182*)

With the publication of *Nelida* in 1846 (first serially, then in book form), Liszt's attitude changed. Although he denied that the book upset him and even pretended that it was about someone other than himself, he never forgave its author, never stopped referring to her as "Nelida," and never missed an opportunity to punish her, either by denying her access to their children (who, born out of wedlock, were, by the law of the day, under his legal guardianship) or by telling her, in the regular correspondence they continued to share, about one or another of his new female relationships.

In contrast to the film portrayal of her (by Bernadette Peters in James Lapine's 1991 *Impromptu*) as a simpering, forever-pregnant hanger-on, Marie was in fact an accomplished woman of letters who later wrote more than a hundred articles, several short stories and plays, and eleven books, including a highly respected history of the 1848 revolution in France and a history of the Netherlands Republic, the latter receiving a commendation of merit by the Académie Française. She has since been recognized in Whitney Walton's *Eve's Proud Descendants* as one of four French women authors (along with George Sand, Delphine Gay, and Hortense Allart) to have most influenced a developing image of republican womanhood in postrevolutionary France.

Adopting the male pseudonym Daniel Stern (Nelida is an anagram for Daniel), she fashioned in *Nelida*, her only major novel, a fictional but strongly autobiographical account of her relationship with Liszt. Because the novel is the best existing record of the seminal years in Liszt's career and includes direct quotes from Liszt's letters to Marie, it is an important reference and a topic of heated debate among Liszt scholars.

A major criticism of the novel by Liszt biographers derives from the fact that the novel gives historically precise information in an otherwise fictional context. One biographer,

Ernest Newman, calls *Nelida* the work of a brilliant historian, more valuable for the fact that Marie's ability to fabricate and invent was, in his view, weaker than her eye for historical detail (125); whereas another, Alan Walker, writes that to regard *Nelida* as a historical document "would be absurd," since it is "mostly the product of Marie's fantasy," possessing "scarcely any literary merit" (396); a third, Derek Watson, summarily dismisses the novel as a "transparent concoction of fact into feeble fiction" (70).

The much-asserted weakness of the novel, its detractors argue, lies in its ending, in which Marie portrays the male character (a painter named Guermann Regnier) as crushed by an artistic challenge beyond his abilities while deeply regretting the loss of Nelida. Liszt, his partisans affirm, went on to ever-higher musical achievement and fame while enjoying many apparently satisfying liaisons with women. Marie's story, they argue, represents delusional wish fulfillment.

Yet much evidence in Marie's memoirs and in their mutual letters from the early years suggests that Marie's novel captures both the depth and power of the couple's relationship, for Liszt as well as for herself. Though Nelida was heavily based on factual information, Marie's intention in writing does not seem to have been to chronicle her history so much as to explore it, as well as to make a literary reputation for herself as writer Daniel Stern. When she began the book in 1843, her emotions were running high. Living apart, she and Liszt were still intimate. "[*Nelida*] was unconscious and timid," she would write years later. "It erupted from inside me like the measles, freeing me from a tormenting virus" (*N.A.F., 14330*). When she learned from friends that a first draft sounded too much like a factual treatment, Marie undertook a major revision. Even so, François Buloz, editor of the prestigious *Revue des Deux Mondes*, turned the manuscript down because it appeared to him a settling of scores between the lovers. (Using a time-honored technique practiced by many male writers, including Ernest Hemingway in *A Farewell to Arms*, Marie had

fictionally killed off a lover whose counterpart had been faithless in real life while her literary protagonist holds true to her hard-won ideals.) Determined to get the story out, Marie then submitted the manuscript to the socialist *Revue Indépendante* where, to the horror of her royalist-leaning, aristocratic relatives, the novel appeared serially during the spring of 1846, becoming something of a Parisian *cause célèbre.* In the summer of that year the publisher Michel Lévy brought it out in book form.

Although the novel was popular reading for a time and gained some praise from critics, it was not hailed as a literary masterpiece. Biographer Charles Dupêchez notes that in its careful crafting and use of concision and ellipses, it was, if not a great work, nevertheless better than a number of George Sand's novels, to which Marie's were invariably compared (175). While avoiding excessive philosophizing and lengthy paeans to nature, it provides subtle analyses of passion, psychological astuteness, and authenticity of character (Introduction to *Nelida,* Dupêchez). In *The Rebel Countess,* biographer Richard Bolster notes that the novel's most revolutionary theme lies in its criticism of class distinctions and its compassion for workers (201). Drawing upon eighteenth-century techniques, it also brilliantly satirizes character (such as Nelida's socialite guardian, the Vicomtesse d'Hespel) and such attitudes as aristocratic snobbery, prejudice, and self-indulgence (as in its reference to nineteenth-century Geneva as a town of small-minded "merchants and Methodists"). Critic Edmond Scherer had already astutely noted in a nineteenth-century essay that for *Nelida* to have been fully successful as a novel would have required better development of the characters and of the psychology of their passions (Dupêchez, 175–176), failings typical, it might be noted, of a first effort. Marie would later call the novel her "first literary sin" that she would have gladly forgotten (Stock-Morton, 117). Elsewhere she refers to it as the epitaph of her youth: "Here lies Nelida. Her son Daniel [Stern] barely mourns her passing; sheds not a single tear" (Stock-Morton, 117).

In all fairness to both d'Agoult and Liszt, *Nelida* cannot be viewed primarily as an act of revenge. One reason is that her own words on the subject ring true: "I did not write [*Nelida*] to attack Liszt," she wrote her friend the painter Henri Lehmann, adding, "I have nothing to gain (even egoistically) by hurting the man who marked my life so deeply and who is the father of my three children" (Introduction to *Nelida*, Dupêchez). She certainly felt wronged in the relationship with Liszt, and she obviously had a strong sense of her own worth. Like most writers, she embellished her position (with the heroine, for example, being shamefully abandoned by her husband rather than, as was the case with Marie, abandoning him) while she clipped the wings of her male partner (Guermann Regnier, once he has abandoned Nelida, is so riddled with guilt that he is incapable of creating great art again and soon dies). Marie structured the novel in such a way that moral justice, as she saw it, would be done in art as it had not been done in life. Even so, instead of exacting real-life revenge at the expense of historical fact, these changes, among other things, serve a literary purpose (and, had they occurred in the work of a male writer, might scarcely have raised an eyebrow). In *Nelida* they highlight the heroine's solitude and, at the conclusion, the drama of her dilemma. By creating a new context and an alternative narrative independent of historical fact, the author accomplishes a personal, emotional purging through art that replaces the need for vengeance in life. Perhaps Marie's critics who have used the scorned-woman stereotype shortchange both her intelligence and her character. Her creative energies, in any case, seem to have been focused elsewhere. Dupêchez states: "[To call the novel an act of revenge] would cheapen the suffering felt by a woman in the face of the repeated infidelities of her lover. [*Nelida*] is above all a cry of deliverance from someone who feels freedom again" (176).

The published record, at least in the United States, has been slanted against Marie, since few of her writings have

been translated into English and, until 2000 when two appeared, no English biography of her was available. Liszt biographers, as mentioned earlier, by and large took Liszt's side in the controversy. And Marie had another formidable adversary. The female author George Sand, who had once been her close friend, later turned against her. (The possible reasons for the break are varied and complex, but seem to center on a mocking criticism by Marie in a letter to a friend concerning Sand's repeated liaisons with men, the letter then being shown to Sand by the treacherous friend.) Sand could and did bear grudges and was steadfast in her vengeance. Not only did she persuade her friend Honoré de Balzac, who at the time did not know Marie, to satirize both Marie and Franz in his 1839 novel *Béatrix*, but she also created a vicious caricature of Marie's so-called artificial intelligence in the figure of the Vicomtesse de Chailly in the 1841 novel *Horace*. Deeply hurt by the ridicule of both authors, Marie nevertheless bore the insult without public comment or effort to avenge herself, repeatedly trying to repair the friendship with Sand and even receiving Balzac to dine several times at her home.

Although most readers of the time were fascinated by the portrayal of the Liszt figure in the novel, the author's focus seems to have been on the female protagonist. Structure, emphasis, and point of view all suggest that the novel's main theme surrounds the trials of its eponymous heroine. "I wanted to paint a woman possessed with the sentiment of the ideal," Marie wrote her friend and fellow writer Hortense Allart, in whose home she had written much of the novel, "[a woman] who believed she would find that ideal in marriage, then in free love. She's mistaken and *should* die, but she lives. She will love again, but not a man (for no man is worth being loved as she has loved): She will love *all those who suffer.* From now on she will act, free and strong" (Stock-Morton, 115).

There are several possibilities worth addressing here concerning d'Agoult's intentional or unintentional motives

for writing *Nelida*. A brief overview of them might help clarify why *Nelida* was not originally read in the way d'Agoult seems to have intended. They may be summarized as follows:

1. Despite public and private statements that she was not seeking revenge, *Nelida*'s author, either through delusion or sheer malice, wanted to destroy Liszt and glorify herself.
2. The author was unaware that the novel's historical and autobiographical subtext, along with its criticism of Liszt, dominated its literary theme.
3. As a beginning novelist, the author was artistically unable to subordinate the historical subtext to the psychological and literary themes she sought to emphasize.
4. Regardless of the author's intent or achievement, readers of the day were drawn to the story of the peccadilloes of the living and highly celebrated Liszt counterpart rather than to the fate of his companion.

The first assumption, adopted by many Liszt partisans, can be modified if not totally dismissed upon close examination of d'Agoult's life—which generally illustrates a repugnance for behavior dominated by vengeance—as well as by study of her work, including *Nelida* (a discussion of which follows). She certainly meant to criticize Liszt, for in her eyes he had behaved badly. She certainly wanted to justify her own actions to the world, but she hardly seems to wish to destroy him. When, for example, the real Marie and Franz fled to Switzerland together, Marie apparently paid the couple's expenses; however, *Nelida's* author explicitly states that the poor but proud artist insisted on financing the couple's expenses, using his modest personal resources. Since the public would not have known otherwise, Marie's novelistic detail hardly seems the assassin's stroke; rather, it seems deliberately protective of Liszt. Later in the novel, Guermann's dalliance

with the siren Elisa Zepponi is presented almost tenderly, the seduction by the redoubtable Elisa being so overwhelming, so engaging, so thrilling as to be virtually irresistible. Marie's word that she did not wish to destroy Liszt can be trusted. She wants the right to tell her version of a story like her own. Rather than being a blood cry for vengeance, *Nelida*'s "cry of deliverance" signals a turn toward the future, not the past—a point frequently missed by critics.

The second possibility, concerning the author's unconscious motives, may have been true at the time of the novel's first draft, but becomes dramatically less so by the major rewriting, when the novelist was quite aware of how the novel might be read and, according to her own comments and those by literary friends, had made substantial revisions to modify its historical parallels. The third possibility, concerning writerly craft, has credibility. Though literarily gifted, Marie was new to the novel form and had had little practice with the subtleties of creative fiction. Few authors could have mastered in a first attempt a major and complex interweaving of novelistic themes, subtly shading one while highlighting another (particularly considering how she notes that the novel "erupted" out of her). She was a novice, and with this book she apparently had little of Wordsworth's "emotion recollected in tranquillity." One of the novel's most powerful strengths, however, lies in the freshness and intensity of its description of the heroine's pain, which, given the novel's genesis, seems to have functioned, unconsciously but brilliantly, as a kind of literary ambergris.

The final possibility, concerning readers' preference for the male figure, is almost certainly true as well. Nineteenth-century France was not, on the whole, a society in which women were regarded as having a destiny apart from men ("Women don't think," her friend the poet and statesman Alphonse de Lamartine had written her, "but sometimes a mysterious voice speaks in them," Stock-Morton, 129). Moreover, Liszt was the *monstre sacré* of his day; from most readers' perspectives, the novel was about him. Few people

of the time would have been visionary enough to read the novel as a primal cry for woman's sexual and social emancipation, themes that were to dominate Marie's later writings. Generations would pass before the sorrowful tale of an abandoned heroine no longer obscured the nascent theme of a woman's right to self-determination and fulfillment.

Beyond questions concerning the novelist's motives or the novel's historical or emotional accuracy lie more provocative ones about the message within the book itself. Rising to speak like the ghost of Ugolino in Dante's *Inferno*, Marie in *Nelida* revives the dialogue of her relationship with Liszt and underscores her sense of herself as a woman with the right to an autonomous destiny. The story that emerges, while not exculpating its creator from blame, nevertheless humanizes her in the telling, as it clearly and precisely recounts her tale of passion, sacrifice, humiliation, and despair. In fact, because it is a work of fiction, the novel *performs* its creator's struggles in a literarily dense and metaphorical way. We should bear in mind where Marie stood emotionally at the time she wrote *Nelida*. The intimate relationship with Liszt, for which she had abandoned social and financial security, was over (although she continued to affirm the value of their relationship until her death in 1876 at age seventy-one). She had long since surrendered any notion of bourgeois respectability. She had twice been savaged in novels by her contemporaries. She was struggling to meet her financial obligations and to sustain a relationship with her four remaining children (struggles she would ultimately lose). Coming from a family marked by a history of depression and suicide, she was emotionally fragile and subject to extended periods of serious illness that occasionally kept her in bed for long periods of time. *Nelida* is far more interesting and important for the insight it gives into this nineteenth-century woman's effort at self-examination and spiritual regeneration than as a study in blame and bitterness or as research into fact versus fiction. By listening carefully to her voice in *Nelida* we may begin to understand something of how Marie's intel-

lect and imagination worked and how she conceptualized her personal dilemma, as well as that of her fictional heroine.

Biographer Dupêchez sees thinly disguised historical figures in the characters of the novel, especially and most notably in the main characters Nelida as Marie d'Agoult, and the painter Guermann Regnier as pianist/composer Franz Liszt. Dupêchez sees Nelida's guardian figure, the Vicomtesse d'Hespel, as the Marquise Le Vayer, at whose home Marie had met Liszt in December 1832. Nelida's mentally handicapped convent friend Claudine, says Dupêchez, is Adélaïde Françoise de Clermont Mont Saint-Jean, a girl Marie had rescued from persecution by classmates in circumstances similar to those described in the novel. In the Mother Superior he sees a "*travesti*" Abbé Lamennais, the antiroyalist cleric whose theories of religious and social reform deeply influenced Liszt and Marie. And in Elisa Zepponi, the Italian *femme fatale* who seduces both Nelida's husband Timoleon and Guermann Regnier, Dupêchez sees an amalgam of all the women in Marie's nightmares, including Princesse Cristina Belgiojoso, pianist Camille Pleyel, dancer Lola Montes, and Comtesse Julie Samoyloff (174–175). He notes that events in the novel also have historical parallels, including the couple's flight into Switzerland, their sojourn in Italy, Liszt's rivalry with Austrian pianist Sigismond Thalberg, Marie's serious illness while in Italy, and Liszt's appointment as Kappelmeister to the Grand Duke at Weimar (175).

Such parallels do exist, providing rich lore for literary and biographical study, but perhaps the connection between real characters and events and fictitious ones is both more layered and more creative than Dupêchez has allowed. Perhaps d'Agoult's imagination is not as sterile as some of her critics have claimed. Assuming that she wrote *Nelida* in an effort to reflect and comprehend an overwhelming loss, it's possible and even likely that she would examine and explore facets of her own personality in a fictional context to evaluate their strengths and weaknesses and to see where

they might ultimately lead. That examination need not be assumed to be narcissistic; rather, it is one of the activities of the creative mind, which so often studies the world through the only sure lens it has: the self. Concerning the protagonist of his own masterpiece, Gustave Flaubert has so provocatively remarked: "Madame Bovary, c'est moi." *Nelida*, quite simply, helped Marie analyze and reconstruct her life.

Although the emphasis in this discussion is on the novel's major female characters rather than on Guermann Regnier—the latter having already been widely studied and analyzed by Liszt biographers—a few comments about him are in order. In a work that consciously plays with name connotations (where one satirical reference, for example, by the multilingual Marie refers to a "Madame de Blonay"), it is significant to note that, although Guermann is French, not only is his first name foreign (Germanic here rather than Hungarian), but also that the name's first syllable carries ambivalent connotations in French: the word *guerre* means *war*, whereas the similarly pronounced *guère* means *hardly*, and the verb *guérir* means *to heal*. Guermann's name, then, suggests a warrior who can heal or a healer who can hurt; but, as his treacherous behavior later proves, he is also "hardly a man" in the behavior he shows toward Nelida. Similarly, *Regnier* (containing the negative verb *nier:* to deny) also suggests *reigning*—a dominant drive of his nature. He is a man who carries strong positive and negative charges within himself. His own destiny depends on how ably he can control and balance those forces. His inability to maintain balance, the author suggests, ultimately derives from a failure of education, both emotional and intellectual. His impulses are too undisciplined, too indulged to allow him to remain on a steady path. The fact that he craters psychically and creatively after his separation from his muse and that he lies dying at novel's end, signaling his spiritual bankruptcy, also sets the stage for the final test of the female protagonist, for not only is Guermann dying, but he is dying in the company of another woman, Nelida's arch rival Elisa Zepponi. Never-

theless, when she learns of his plight, Nelida doesn't hesitate: "Take me to him!" she commands gentle Monsieur Bernard, who agrees to accompany her on the long journey from Lyon to the unnamed German town where Guermann lies waiting. Only at this moment do we see the full scale of her stature: She is the absolute embodiment of sacrificial love. Guermann must die in order for us to see the tragic and wasted dimensions of her sacrifice, for with his death goes Nelida's future. Her destiny depends on him, and because he fails as an artist, she too fails as a muse. She is Beatrice who loses her Dante.

The otherwise odd inclusion of a new male character near the end of the novel further clarifies Marie's depiction of Guermann. The young fresco painter, Ewald from Cologne, who first appears in chapter twenty-five to warmly befriend the distraught artist, is the healthy antithesis of Guermann. He, even more than Guermann, has an overwhelming love for his art, but unlike Guermann, he doesn't have the least concern, much less Guermann's obsession, with social position. Comfortable with people of every class and insouciant of social status, Ewald, suggests the author (his pipe bears the Italian inscription *Fumo de gloria non vale fumo di pipa*: Glory's smoke can't match a pipe's smoke), is the artist that Guermann might have been.

The character Nelida, though certainly resembling d'Agoult in many respects, hardly represents her in others. Nelida is blonde, beautiful, idealistic, aristocratic, and reserved—all traits ascribed to Marie herself (Marie's reserve, however, was qualified by one contemporary who called it "six inches of snow over twenty feet of lava," Dupêchez, 164). Although the relationship with Guermann is adulterous, its sexual dimension receives little play in the novel. Throughout the story, Nelida is presented as chaste and spiritual, characteristics that remain unchanged after her adulterous liaison. For her part, the flesh and blood Marie also noted on a number of occasions that her innermost nature inclined toward chastity, spirituality, and contemplation.

Nelida, like Marie, is also emotionally fragile, with tendencies toward depression that occasionally bordered on the self-destructive (Nelida's attempt to throw herself into the Seine and her recurrent loss of a will to live closely parallel similar occurrences in Marie's personal life).

But the literary figure is one-dimensional in character and behavior, traits not true of the complex and multifaceted Marie. Nelida is, as her author has claimed, "possessed by a sentiment of the ideal." This single driving passion, as strong in Nelida as in any of Balzac's characters, may aesthetically weaken both the character and the novel, but the choice to structure the novel in this way seems to have been intentional on Marie's part. The character appears almost distressingly incapable of egotism or artifice (except for self-sacrificial dissembling), even when her self-preservation is as stake. Nelida is too pure to flirt in the way that her rivals Hortense Langin and Elisa Zepponi do and too honest to manipulate others for power as the Mother Superior has done. Nelida's love for Guermann seems eventually to go through and beyond the man himself. At the first moment she has a chance to write her friend Hortense after her flight to Switzerland with Guermann, Nelida confides that she is deeply unhappy and always will be, but that she has the highest of callings, to love sacrificially a man of genius. Later, when she decides that Guermann is unworthy of the sacrifice she has made, she continues to honor her commitment, which now fixes on an ideal concept of love, as if in defiance of its original subject. It is Nelida's poem to this effect, asserting her own self-possession and independence from Guermann, that catapults the enraged man into the arms of a waiting Elisa Zepponi. In the lovers' relationship, Nelida must play the subsidiary role of muse, for Guermann will not allow her to be his equal. Nelida therefore remains a fixed point of reference in the novel, unwilling to deny her love for Guermann, yet also unwilling to alter her love of the ideal. Like a chaste priestess, she represents a pure and absolute form of sacrificial love. As such, she is limited as a character. Unless she shows herself to

be capable of change (something hinted at in the novel's epilogue), she must move in a single, fatal direction toward her martyrdom.

A second major female figure in the novel is Elisa Zepponi, who is presented in the climactic scene of chapter twelve as the antithesis to Nelida—not an inspirational and spiritual muse but an earthy and sensual mistress. In the following scene, Elisa makes her entrance in Nelida's home:

> . . . Never, perhaps, has the genius of painting or statuary created a more complete set of antitheses of youth and beauty. Neither woman was yet twenty years old. Elisa Zepponi embodied the full bloom of a type of earthly beauty that, without regard to the soul, exerts an all-the-more irresistible power over the senses. The full oval of her face . . . was flushed with color. . . . Her low forehead was framed by two bluish-black bands of glistening hair. Her sparkling pupils swam in fluid, like stars reflected in a spring. Her lips, always slightly parted, revealed two rows of pearlescent teeth. Her nose, whose delicate nostrils flared at the slightest emotion, the luxuriant curves of her arms and shoulders, her easy walk, even her slightly husky voice—everything about her breathed softness, promised pleasure, and whispered voluptuous ecstasy.

By contrast, Nelida represents a different strain of woman:

> An ashen tone had spread over the gold of her hair, but her transparent skin was still as pale, and her look had lost none of its maidenly purity. When she moved forward to meet the Marquise [Zepponi], one might have called her the calm and pensive North Muse in the presence of a laughing Athenian courtesan.

In the novel, the contrasts are unambiguous: If Nelida ascends to heavenly spheres, Elisa dwells among the infernal. If Nelida is Dante's Beatrice, Elisa is Francesca da Rimini, condemned to the everlasting whirlwind of hell for her self-abandon to sensual pleasure. Although the physical attributes of Elisa and Nelida contrast greatly, the contrasts between the fictional Elisa and the historical Marie are far less clear, and comparisons between the fictional Nelida and the historical Marie are far less close. Unlike Nelida, Marie was keenly aware of her exceptional beauty, charm, and wit, and throughout her life showed an accomplished ability to use every asset at her disposal to attract men—whether for the simple delight and/or power of it, or to embellish her stylish salon with the illustrious names of enamored guests, or to promote some social, political, or literary cause, including her own. Unlike Elisa, however, Marie seems never, after her liaison with Liszt, to have become involved sexually with any of the men she attracted. Her effort consistently appears to have been to convert their sexual attraction into abiding friendship. One of the sadly funny notes in Marie's biography concerns the persistently unsuccessful attempts of literary critic and writer Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve to lure her into sexual dalliance. For years she parleyed his passion without yielding to him. He ultimately punished her by refusing to publish any of the laudatory comments he had made to her and others concerning her writing. More noble homage was rendered by Émile de Girardin, publisher of the widely disseminated newspaper *La Presse*, who helped Marie develop as a writer, journalist, and historian while remaining a close, lifelong friend. There were dozens of others, including such staunch devotees as poet Louis de Ronchaud, whose epitaph read: "He was the slave of Madame d'Agoult and had love, friendship, and worship for her alone" (Dupêchez, 181); and Louis Tribert, who, after Marie's death and at the age of fifty-seven, married for the first time—Marie's chambermaid! Clearly, Marie the creator stands somewhere between her creations—the chaste Nelida and the seductive Elisa.

Dozens of literary testimonies exist concerning Marie's seemingly effortless ability to charm. Pleasing and delighting others was obviously important to her. A desire for power and control may lie behind part of that effort, but to limit the aim of her charm to manipulativeness would be inaccurate, given the consistent evidence her life offers of a capacity for abiding friendship. A term revived by modern physicists to explain the mysterious powers of attraction possessed by certain subatomic particles, *charm,* for Marie, may have more simply represented an end in itself. Rather than being a *means to* something, it was, more likely in her case, a *manifestation of* something within her character, that something being an emphasis on the importance of relationship to others. In *Essai sur la Liberté Considérée comme Principe et Fin de l'Activité Humaine/*Essay on Liberty Considered as the Principle and End of Human Activity (1847), Marie affirmed the value of passion as a source of the vital energies necessary for the exercise of freedom, with freedom being defined solely in the framework of a relationship to others (Stock-Morton, 120). In other words, Marie had begun constructing a systematic, philosophical view of the world based, in part, on her experience as a woman.

Whereas the fixed Nelida remains too true to her own ideals to endure the impurities of relationship, the mobile Elisa has no such compunctions. She, in fact, lives by means of her abilities to attract men. She is also unabashedly manipulative, twice seducing Nelida's husband Timoleon de Kervaens and twice discarding him, along with dozens of others. Yet even in her manipulativeness, she displays the relational qualities of charm. She remains with and cares for Guermann, who is ill and and nearly insane and who even rebuffs her forcefully, well after their sexual pleasures and her personal thrill of conquest have ceased. Perhaps it was important to Marie that Elisa appear one last time in the novel so that Nelida might stand vindicated before her rival; even so, the author could have created other, more limited, scenarios for such a settling of scores. Instead, she

chooses to emphasize a relationship, even a unity, between the two women:

> What a meeting! And what sinister games fate plays! For the second time, it brought these two women together, destined to suffer at each other's hands, destined to suffer together. The first time, in a splendid, celebrative setting, they had held out hands that trembled with jealousy. They had exchanged looks of defiance still sparkling with youthful presumption. Today, two steps from a dying person, both so pale they could have passed for ghosts, their hands seek one another in an embrace that misfortune makes sincere. Their eyes meet without hatred. Now, no spark gleams: the same terror fills them with fear; the same fate crushes them.

What Marie seems to condemn in Elisa Zepponi's character is not her charm or even her compulsion to attract men, but her having twisted those drives to serve a selfish desire for power and personal pleasure. Through her steadfast behavior at the end of the novel, Elisa briefly rises above selfishness. The indication is given, however, that she will not be able to sustain such heroism in the face of her spiritual chaos, her lack of self-discipline, and her characteristic abandonment to her passions. Charm, and, by association, close relationships with others may be important, Marie indicates, but only when they are carefully scrutinized and controlled.

Dupêchez is correct in pointing out the resemblance between the fictional Mother Superior (Mother Saint Elizabeth) and the real-life revolutionary Abbé Lamennais. But the political and temperamental parallels between the two don't begin to account for the pages of monologue by the nun that detail her upbringing as a female in a male world, her subsequent yearnings for political power in a world where such power is denied to women, and her inability to love—

characteristics of her nature more fundamental, even, than her revolutionary fervor. In a different way, she is as incomplete and one-dimensional as Nelida and Elisa. Nelida had tried to reach her destiny by living sacrificially through a man; Elisa had tried to reach hers by selfishly using men for personal power; Mother Saint Elizabeth, incapable of either form of intimacy, tries hers through an autonomous act of power and will. In an effort to secure Nelida's help in perpetuating her mission of social reform, Mother Saint Elizabeth deliberately exposes her psychic brokenness to Nelida and to the reader. She is, in Marie's portrayal of her, a woman who has learned to function in a man's world by truncating her feminine nature, becoming a sort of asexual monster whose drive for power is controlled only by a conscious act of will redirected into altruistic service. Even in her youth she could not surrender her drive for dominance long enough to acknowledge Emile Ferez's passionate overtures to her. Her destiny, ultimately, is as thwarted by inner and outer limitations as are Nelida's and Elisa's.

Marie's subtle and passionate scrutiny of Mother Saint Elizabeth as a woman has no bearing on the historical figure of Abbé Lamennais. It is the female dimension of the character—a woman forging her own destiny in conditions hostile to it—that leaves the more lasting impression on the reader. Additionally, beyond and far more interesting than the historical parallels with Lamennais, Mother Saint Elizabeth represents yet another major facet of d'Agoult. Both women, in effect, were fascinating anomalies of their time: intellectuals who would create their identities apart from their relationships with men. D'Agoult would first become a *salonnière* renowned for the political and intellectual panache of her gatherings, then a celebrated journalist, playwright, and author.

Speaking to Nelida, Mother Saint Elizabeth in chapter twenty-three describes her own intellectual development as having occurred in her father's salon under the tutelage of elderly men:

> My father, who had no friends in the sense you and I attach to the word, had extremely close political connections. His salon was the usual meeting place for former or future ministers or all those who left their mark in any way on diplomacy, administration, and journalism. They spoke freely and brilliantly. They evaluated men and events from a high-minded perspective, with an unflinching rigor of logic that was exempt from passion. . . . Encouraged by the benevolence of one of the kindly old gentlemen who gathered in our home, I dared ask questions a few times that surprised him. He let me talk and learned that not only was I aware of all the subjects under discussion but that I could follow a rigorous line of argument, that I quickly grasped the right point in questions.

Soon the young girl was at the center of these gatherings, engaged in lively discourse with men.

Biographer Richard Bolster points to a circumstance in Marie's youth that closely parallels Mother Saint Elizabeth's explanation of her intellectual development, noting that Marie at age fourteen was not allowed by her mother to waltz at the many balls the family attended, because the waltz was considered too intimate a form of contact for unmarried girls. Instead, Marie at one point engaged the attention of an elderly diplomat who was struck by her seriousness and precocious wit. He then introduced her to a group of his colleagues. Soon, and for an entire season of dances, Marie was surrounded and flattered by a group of grown men (Bolster, 43). Alerted to the heady dangers of such attention, Marie's mother did not allow the season's situation to repeat itself. Nevertheless, at a young age Marie had discovered that she had the wit and flair to attract and sustain the attention of men in lively intellectual discourse.

Like Mother Saint Elizabeth, d'Agoult would be praised for her "male and philosophical mind" by male contempo-

raries (Stock-Morton, 154). Even French President Louis Adolphe Thiers, who disagreed with Marie's political views, said of her: "She is not benevolent, but is impartial. That hussy of a woman has a good mind" (Stock-Morton, 154). "What a bore to be a woman," Marie had confided in her diary: "I would love to govern" (Stock-Morton, 137–139). And, like the fictional nun she created, Marie was called a Madame Roland (in Marie's case, by Lamartine, who for a time headed France's provisional government). Late in the novel we learn that Mother Saint Elizabeth's first name is Faustine, a feminine version of the legendary Faust who, in his most famous rendering by Wolfgang von Goethe, covets ever-greater knowledge and power in the world. The choice of the character's name once again is significant. The two books prized above all others by d'Agoult, which stayed at her bedside through her mature life and about which late in life she wrote her own book, were Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Goethe's *Faust.* Her own life, she thought, resembled what she referred to as the life of a *Fausta* (Dupêchez, 282).

Far from having a sterile imagination, Marie was quite capable of drawing from and complexly reshaping both internal and external resources at her disposal, thereby setting up the psychological dynamics of *Nelida* through which she is able to examine her own past and future directions as she spins a web of fiction. Strongly eighteenth century in her emphasis on a moral interpretation of experience and in her brilliant social satire, Marie also draws from Voltaire and other *philosophes* in setting up *Nelida* as a study in ideas, albeit highly personal ones that she held passionately. Her nature, as she saw it, was masculine in that her reason, imagination, and heart remained separated from one another (Stock-Morton, 219); in *Nelida* she studies the fault lines of those separations. She was right to call the novel the epitaph of her youth, because each of its three major female characters reaches an impasse and must acknowledge personal failure. Each of them—the chaste maiden, the voluptuous lover, and the severe wise woman—

is flawed and incomplete, both as a woman and as a human being. With pitiless eyes, the author scrutinizes her own gifts, her own shortcomings.

But, one imagines her asking, if these flaws could be modified or eliminated, if these strengths could be joined into a complex unity, a woman at once intellectual, loving, and automonous might emerge. If, for example, a woman could retain Nelida's passion for the ideal without having to base that passion on a man, and if she could use all the charms at her disposal without twisting them to serve her personal vanity, and if she could pursue a fundamental course of political and social reform without losing her sense of relationship to others, then she might achieve an autonomous and rational identity, grounded in but not bound by her experience as a woman. Nelida the maiden, under the scrupulous tutelage of Mother Saint Elizabeth, will have to transform her exclusive love for a man into an inclusive love for humanity. Likewise, Marie the author must shape the sundered facets of her character into a balanced, interlocking unity. What d'Agoult seems to have been seeking in *Nelida* was a means to psychic integration of character, wholeness of being.

The development of d'Agoult's career after *Nelida* suggests that she tried to negotiate just such an enterprise—as a writer, historian, political activist, and social reformer. She would see herself in these endeavors as unlike the men of her time, because she would ground her actions in what she defined as her womanly strengths—her idealism, her charm, and her sense of relatedness to others. Out of whatever brokenness and personal desolation her novel grew, inseparably linked to its literary and aesthetic qualities, *Nelida* is the workshop where d'Agoult began to shape her mature identity. The fact that the novel reveals itself to be the hard-won product of her pain eloquently attests to the integrity of her character and the strength of her spirit.

—Lynn Hoggard, Midwestern State University

Prologue

> All the phenomena of the present age reveal that satisfaction with the old life is not to be found.
>
> —*Hegel*

At its zenith, the June sun flooded the horizon with light, and no cloud veiled the heavens' splendor. A hot breeze flitted over the pond and came to play noisily among the reeds. Near the bank, in the shade of a row of poplars, a pair of swans dozed. The water lily spread its white wings over the mirroring waters. In a little boat tied to the trunk of a willow whose supple branches formed a cool, mobile canopy over their heads, two attractive children sat together, holding hands. The older one, a sturdy, well-proportioned boy of about twelve, had dark eyes and deeply tanned skin: a country boy thriving on sunlight, accustomed to carefree play at the heart of nature. The other was a girl who seemed a year or two younger. Her perfect features were incomparable, but her frail body already showed the unsettling grace of a constitution either too delicate or too hastily matured. Her creamy, white neck bent under the weight of her golden hair; her cheeks had an unhealthy pallor; faint circles lay under her azure eyes. Everything about the charming creature suggested an ebbing of vital strength.

Suddenly standing up, the boy said, "Staying in the same spot all the time is too boring. I'm going to unhook the chain, and we'll go over there to see the teals' nest."

"I'm afraid!" said the girl, trying to hold her companion's strong, suntanned hand in both of hers.

"I'll do the rowing," he answered with exaggerated seriousness. Freeing himself easily from the weak grip that held him back, he untied the rowboat, grabbed the oar, and headed toward the middle of the pond without listening to his companion's protests. With a pleading look, she cried, "Guermann! Guermann!"

A brief silence of thrilled terror: "Oh, my God!" the girl said. "Suppose they see us! Look! I think my aunt's window is open."

Guermann looked up. The sun shone squarely on the château windows that sparkled dazzlingly. No one was on the Vicomtesse d'Hespel's balcony.

"She won't recognize us this far away," he said. "Besides, she's not there. Too bad if she did see us!"

"So you're not afraid they'll fuss at you?" asked the girl, gaining confidence. "What does your mother say when you do something she's told you not to do?"

"Oh—first of all, my mother doesn't have time to tell me not to do much of anything; and second, Nelida, when I do something wrong, she doesn't fuss. She cries."

"And then?"

"And then, I kiss her."

"And then?"

"And then she acts half-upset, half-happy, and says: 'Bad boy! You're always having to be forgiven!' I know all that ahead of time."

Talking to each other, the two children came to a part of the pond blocked by a thicket of reeds and other aquatic plants. Guermann carefully spread open a tangle of rushes to reveal silky egrets, like winter snowflakes, secreted away in the lush greenery. Catching sight of a teal's nest, Nelida uttered a cry of delight: Warming under a ray of the sun lay

eight or ten small, tawny-green eggs, polished and shining. For a long time she studied the sight—so new to her. Never had she been able to see such a thing—she, a melancholy city child isolated from nature. Never had she awakened to the lark's song, never tugged wild blackberries off their prickly stems, never beheld a butterfly emerge for the first time to spread its young wings in the scented April air. Since the death of her parents, both lost to her while still in her cradle, Nelida de la Thieullaye had been turned over to the care of her aunt, the Vicomtesse d'Hespel, and had almost never left Paris. This year, however, the vicomtesse had decided to spend two months in her country home. Yet even here she worried about the ill effects on Nelida of the sun and the dew; and, for fear of wolves, snakes, bats, and frogs, which terrified her, she almost never allowed the child out of the château. She had expressly forbidden her ever to go past the park—surrounded on three sides by a high wall and on the other by the pond—where Nelida at this very moment had ventured, despite the clearest interdictions.

After pondering the nest for a long time in a state of abstraction, she said, "Now, quickly, take me back to the house."

Guermann picked up the oar, but instead of directing the boat to the shore alongside the park, and heedless of his companion's entreaties, he headed for the opposite shore, which bordered the public road.

"It's too nice out here to go back yet," he said. "Let's walk for a while. We'll be back before they even notice you're not in the yard any more."

He tied the boat to a pole, picked up Nelida, who trembled in his arms, lifted her nimbly, crossed the road while singing at the top of his lungs both to attract and defy onlookers, leapt a ditch, stepped over a hedge, and deposited his gentle burden on the edge of a field of flowering clover.

Made bolder by Guermann's decisiveness, enchanted by the boundless horizon that opened before her, thrilled

by the free wind blowing directly across her for the first time, the timid child began to run through the fields as fast as her heart and legs could carry her, in spite of a few stumbles in the rough furrows and in spite of repeatedly catching the fluttering ribbons of her muslin dress in the branches. These mishaps caused great bursts of laughter that came back to them in surprised echoes along the way.

After having run, leaped, and wandered in all directions along the fragrant hedges, on the mossy edge of the woods, and in the grass of the fields joyfully trampling daisies, buttercups, and foxgloves, plucking bouquets of them to toss immediately away, the two came to the base of an orchard planted on a hill facing south and closed to them by a high fence.

"Oh—what beautiful cherries!" exclaimed Nelida, glancing longingly at the berries reddening on a tree a little way from the road, believing them completely out of reach.

"You want them?" Guermann asked, his practiced eye already spotting a place where the stakes were less solidly joined. After several attempts that scraped his hands and knees until they bled, he squeezed through. Climbing the cherry tree, breaking a branch heavy with fruit, racing back, jumping the fence—all in an eyeblink.

"Let's go!" Guermann cried, grabbing the thunderstruck girl's arm. "Old man Girard saw me; he's a grouch who's going to come after us."

Like a deer chased by hounds, he ran, pulling the girl behind him. Reaching the pond within ten minutes, not even looking back to see if he was followed, he pushed Nelida into the rowboat, jumped in after her, pushed vigorously with his leg to launch the little skiff, plied his oars, and soon got out of range of the bank and into the middle of the rushes and the water lilies. Only then did the two dare look back. Old man Girard was just arriving, breathless, his face bright red, his forehead dripping sweat. His hoarse voice and clenched fist rained threats and curses on

the shameless marauder who had dared, under his very eyes, to steal his most beautiful fruit. Nelida began to cry.

"Eat your cherries," said Guermann in a tone so imperious that she automatically obeyed, letting a tear fall on the half-ripened fruit.

"I was wrong to want these cherries," she said softly. "It's bad to steal."

"So it's time for a sermon now, is it? Eat your cherries and stop crying. Old man Girard will think we're scared."

Tired of wasting his time yelling and seeing himself mocked by a little scamp, old man Girard stalked off, swearing to file a complaint with the local police. Nelida returned to the château in dismay and was severely reprimanded for the sorry state of her outfit. Madame Regnier, Guermann's mother, who lived in a little house in the village, placated her angry neighbor with a small sum of money and a multitude of soft words. For his part Guermann made no other apologies. His only words, proud and disdainful, were "Those cherries weren't all that good. Besides, they weren't for me."

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Part One

I

Four years went by. Nelida entered the Convent of the Annonciade for her First Communion, delayed year by year because of almost continually fragile health that had caused serious concern. Supervised by the ladies of the Annonciade, she would stay at the boarding school until she reached eighteen, the age settled upon for her marriage. The Vicomtesse d'Hespel was totally ruled by conventional wisdom. To her, conjugal union was nothing more than an institution that gave social status to women. Marriage, as she saw it, was a negotiation whose merits could and should be weighed, pen in hand, only within the notary's office. Thinking rightly that Mademoiselle de la Thieullaye, who was heiress to a sizable fortune, would be pursued by the most eligible bachelors the moment she came of age, the aunt had concluded that she might very well spare herself the nuisance of accompanying Nelida to balls spanning several winter seasons, preferring as she did to go on her own account. Nelida was unaware of her aunt's strategies but, had she known, would not have minded in the least. Her temperament was sweet and docile, tending instinctively toward respect. She had not yet even fathomed an awareness of her own tastes or her own desires. So she entered the convent without protest. Quickly, without daring to admit it to herself,

she became happier there than she had been in her aunt's home.

Communal religious life holds a solemn charm that attracts and seduces fertile imaginations. All those beings joined into a single being, the hidden rule to which all incline, the silence on every lip, the obedience, quiescence of will in every heart; young women shrouded in mourning and singing funereal canticles in honeyed voices, the organ's powerful tones vibrating beneath tentative fingers; all religion's severities draped with tender grace; a certain ineffable mixture, ultimately, of joy and sadness, humility and ecstasy revealed in faces of melancholic serenity. All these things, as if by surprise, captivate the transported senses and take hold of the heart. More than others, Nelida wanted to be penetrated by this poetry of the cloister. Gifted with an exquisite sensibility, she had a trusting soul susceptible to mystical transports. The gentle child who one fine June day seemed white as the water lilies, supple as the reeds of Hespel pond, the frightened rebel who ran with a boy through the countryside without fear or shame became a calm and serious young woman of incredible beauty. But no spring roses bloomed on her cheek. Youth's confident smile didn't part her reticent lips. Her walk was listless, her voice full of tears. Slow to rise, her eyelids revealed a shattered expression, heavy with a dread that seemed to plead for mercy. One might assume that her whole being inclined toward suffering.

With the practiced eye of woman and nun, the Mother Superior of the convent took note of the extreme sensitivity of the fragile creature given to her care and became a kind of guardian to her. Rather than having her sleep in the dormitory, she had a small cell next to her own prepared, which was done with uncommon care. The mahogany bed was wrapped in muslin curtains; a strip of rug, actually quite narrow and thin for fear of scandalizing convent sisters unaccustomed to such refinements, was spread at the foot of the bed so that the young girl might kneel there morning and evening without feeling the cold flagstone too sharply.

At the head of the bed, the Mother Superior herself had hung a finely carved, ivory crucifix; across from it, a Madonna by Raphael adorned the bare wall. Unheard of in the austerity of a monastery, the nun had two pots of white heather from the garden placed beneath the holy image, as if to honor it more fully, and ordered that they be replaced when they showed signs of fading. A dressing table and mirror with two fig-wood chairs completed the room's furnishings; its single window opened onto a lime-tree bower planted in staggered rows, just then in full blossom and exhaling a sweet perfume.

When she moved Nelida into this cubbyhole, the Mother Superior handed her the key to a cabinet of about thirty books not part of the boarding school library. It was a secret treasure all too suited to the girl's dreamy tendencies by authors more fervent than they were orthodox, more beguiled than convinced, who drew out of doctrine only such nectar as could be distilled into honey, who understood the Gospel only in terms of Magdalene's perfumes or John's blond head resting on Christ's tender breast, and who spoke freely, using soft terms of endearment, about the ardors of the divine love consuming them. Nelida made full use of the freedom she had been given. The uncommon appeal of these stirring books, with their sensuous ecstasies and ravishments in God, thrust so suddenly without preparation or counterweight upon her eager imagination and youthful instincts that were just beginning to awaken, caused enormous turmoil in her mind. The dithyrambic effusions of these Theresas, Chantals, Liguoris on the breast of their bridegroom or celestial friend affected her like intoxicating music, plunging her soul and senses into voluptuous daydreams. She was soon absorbed in these readings to the point that she viewed her regular studies and the prattle of her classmates with mortal dread. Moreover, she was not attracted to a single girl among them. Most were noble and wealthy young ladies like herself, but so arrogant, so besotted with their own nobility and money as to be of no interest. All

were unhappy to be in the convent, all chafed to leave, and all spoke, gushing vainly, of nothing but the splendors of the paternal estate and the countless pleasures that waited for them.

The Mother Superior came almost daily at the end of her duties to sit beside Nelida, already in bed, and chat with her, perhaps about the approaching First Communion, or about the dangers of the world in which the young girl would live, or about her readings, explaining symbols and hidden meanings from an unusually high-minded perspective marked by persuasiveness and eloquence. As the days went by, the nun took greater and greater interest in her pupil who, for her part, was passionately drawn to her mentor. Mother Saint Elizabeth, which was her name, had carried an illustrious name in the world. Beneath the modesty of the nun's habit and linen headband, one could still easily see in her an involuntarily aristocratic bearing, the kind that gives women a great birthright and great beauty. She was, however, no longer beautiful, although scarcely thirty years old; she had suffered too much. Her oval face might have expressed perfect purity, but grief had wasted her cheeks. Her straight and proud nose, the fine molding of her pale lips, suggested statuary's noblest forms, but her hard, dark, intense eyes sank deeply in their sockets, and her forehead was lined with wrinkles that deepened alarmingly at the slightest gathering of her thick eyebrows. Everything about her bore the traces of a violent battle of passions dominated rather than appeased. When she moved to the chancel, tall and a little bowed under her long black veils, a silver cross gleaming on her breast, she elicited a mixture of respect, amazement, curiosity, and fear; she exuded a hidden strength that both drew others to her and pushed them away. A spectator might see revealed in her a great destiny that had been shattered.

One evening, returning later than usual from a supervisory visit to the dormitories, she saw light coming from Nelida's cell. Irritated by such disobedience and abuse of privilege from the girl, she entered abruptly, a harsh word of reproach on her lips. But an unexpected scene made her

anger vanish. In her nightgown, Nelida was kneeling at the foot of the crucifix, her hands joined, eyes uplifted, face bathed in tears. Her loosened hair fell in heavy waves over her white gown; her two bare feet were just visible beneath the pristine folds that totally enveloped her. A little lamp on the floor glimmered unsteadily over her, sketching her silhouette faintly in the small cell's somber depths. She resembled a grief-stricken Mary beside the empty tomb or one of the angels—as they appeared in Florence's Church of Saint Mark to the blessed brother of Fiesole—grieving for humanity's sins. For a long time Mother Saint Elizabeth stood still and contemplated her favored child, who was so lost in intense prayer that she didn't see or hear anything around her. Then, moved by respect for the mysterious union between a soul free of blemish and the God of love, the nun also knelt. For several minutes, these two women, one who had let go of all earthly hopes, the other just setting her foot on life's threshold, sent the same prayer heavenward.

They stood up at the same time and, without a word, fell into each other's arms. "What is it?" Mother Saint Elizabeth finally asked in a kind voice, forgetting she had come to issue a reprimand. "Why are you all in tears? Do you have some heartache I don't know about? Are you hiding something from me, Nelida?"

"Nothing in the world, Holy Mother!" the girl answered with convincing honesty.

"But these tears, this prayer so late in the night?"

"I'm hurting, Holy Mother," the child answered. "I'm hurting a lot."

"Why not tell me about it sooner? Why not confide your trouble in me?"

The nun had sat down near the bed. Nelida came to sit at her feet and, taking one of the nun's hands in her own, marked it with her burning lips.

"Are you unhappy to be here?" Mother Saint Elizabeth went on, seeing that the girl maintained her silence.

"Could you even think such a thing?" Nelida asked. "On the contrary, all my fear is about leaving here too soon.

I'm afraid of the world. The thought of entering it fills me with a dread I can't explain. It seems certain to me that I'll offend God and lose my soul. I constantly hear a mournful voice inside telling me I have to die—die, or else—but I don't dare finish."

"Say it, my child," the Mother Superior answered, squeezing Nelida's hand in her own thin one.

"Or else, Holy Mother, I'll never leave you, never see the world: Wear the veil."

"Beware such madness!" cried the Mother Superior, her voice trembling.

Nelida looked at her in surprise.

"Do you think, then, Holy Mother, that I'm unworthy—"

"Child," answered Mother Saint Elizabeth, not letting her finish, "you don't know what cloistered life is!" And she created for the girl, who hung on her words, a picture of monastic life that was so dreary, so desolate, so moving, and so profoundly true—its monotony, its unpleasantness, its inevitable pettiness—that the girl shuddered, and a very simple question, which the nun no doubt had not thought of, came to her lips:

"You're that unhappy, then, Holy Mother?"

Mother Saint Elizabeth's whole body shook.

"I am what it pleases God for me to be," she answered, standing up abruptly. "It doesn't matter. But, my child, it's unthinkable to me for you to keep vigil like this: Your head's in the clouds, your body's exhausted, you're making up daydreams for yourself. Tomorrow you must see Father Aimery. Even more than in the past, you must put yourself under his direction. He's a man of great wisdom and prudence; he'll know better than I how to give you helpful advice and bring peace to your troubled soul."

Then Mother Saint Elizabeth moved toward the door, gesturing that Nelida should not follow.

Neither of them found a moment's sleep the rest of the night.

II

At five in the morning the Mother Superior was waiting for Father Aimery in the sacristy. The room was gloomy, longer than it was wide, forever damp, even in the heat of summer, since it was below ground level. A high, narrow window of orange stained glass cast a strange, unreal glow through the room. Across from the window, a Christ in bone yellowed by time stretched its withered arms across a background of black fabric framed in boxwood. Two huge cupboards of ancient, worm-eaten wood took up the side walls. One held altar cloths, candelabra, vases, ornaments of all kinds; the other was the priests' vestiary. An open confessional, made from a pine board cut by a section of wire netting, served as the place where strangers drawn by Father Aimery's reputation came to confess. The Reverend Father's prie-dieu, armchair, and several tapestried chairs completed the dreary room's furnishings. After having paced the room in several directions, the nun finally sat in the armchair. She seemed highly agitated. She periodically glanced at the exterior door that wasn't opening. Throughout the night she had thought of Nelida. She regretted having dissuaded her from entering religious life. The calling the girl thought she felt, the frenzy she had so vehemently displayed, now appeared to the nun in an utterly different light. Noble souls don't receive selfish thoughts by a direct route. They take long detours, adorning themselves with manifold disguises. Thus Mother Saint Elizabeth, who at first had fought Nelida's exaltation with all her strength, had, on reflection, felt a passionate desire swell in her heart to keep this precious

child close by. The wish to join her sterile existence to that of a sensitive and charming creature, the wish finally to confide, share her thoughts, caused a stirring in her she couldn't control. She was so tired of her derisory authority, so weary of ordering an idiotic herd of women around, most of whom had set their embroidery aside for a rosary, their romance novels for the Psalms, oblivious to the difference, and the rest with no greater force of mind than precisely the amount necessary to spread small-minded jealousies, spats, and vain intrigues throughout the community! She suffocated under the imposed silence that prohibited assertion of her vigorous thought. Mother Saint Elizabeth was one of those women for whom governing a kingdom would not seem too heavy a burden. Her mind was for the machinations of business, her character for taking charge. Far from there, the unlucky woman saw herself reduced to discussing the date for a novice's vows, arranging the order of a procession in a cloister courtyard, reprimanding novices for speaking in chapel. So she rushed desperately toward this glimmer of hope that had suddenly appeared on her horizon. To justify in her own eyes what she was doing (never willing to be justified in the eyes of others, haughty souls always must placate the rigid judge within), she told herself that, after all, models for true vocation did exist; that Nelida seemed destined to suffer greatly in the world; that she wouldn't have enough strength to fight the exhaustion and emotion of active life; and that the monotony of the cloister would be less trying on her contemplative turn of mind than the century's far-flung, mad pleasures.

While she was accommodating herself more and more, as such things go, to the selfishness of her secret thoughts, the door opened silently, and Father Aimery slipped into, rather than entered, the sacristy.

"You're late arriving, Father," the Mother Superior said, lifting herself slightly from the armchair.

Pulling out his watch, he replied, "It's five-thirty, Sister Elizabeth; I don't say mass until six."

Mother Saint Elizabeth was silent. Her impatience had made time drag. Father Aimery was as precise as a clock.

"Is there anything new in the community?" he continued, taking off his dark brown, quilted-silk overcoat, laying it carefully over the back of a chair, and opening the vestiary to take his alb.

"Nothing in the community, but at the boarding school we have a pupil who wants to enter religious life—"

"Which one?" Father Aimery interrupted, lifting his piercing, gray eyes to the nun.

"Mademoiselle de la Thieullaye."

"Nelida de la Thieullaye? That can't be."

"This calling seems quite genuine," said the nun, softening a voice that assumed, when she chose, an assertiveness few in the past had resisted. "Nelida is a child of steady mind, quite mature for her age, whose honesty of intention is beyond question."

"I'm not saying that she hasn't been called. I'm saying that we shouldn't allow her to follow this calling," the confessor answered in a measured tone.

"But, Father," said Mother Saint Elizabeth, becoming more intense, "you can't imagine the precious conquest this would be for faith and especially for our order—"

"We have too many such conquests," said the Father, who had put on his alb and was marking the day's preface and orison in his missal. "You know perfectly well our enemies accuse us of surprise conversions; they say we entice, capture young heiresses. If I'm not mistaken, I heard those things said of you when you became a nun. No. Mademoiselle de la Thieullaye has a substantial fortune. It's known she's been treated by you with exceptional consideration, which is enough to cause slander. All this works to our disadvantage. We're in difficult times. Mademoiselle de la Thieullaye must remain in the outside world. She'll serve us much more effectively there than here."

"But, Father," the nun interrupted, turning pale with anger, "as long as she's in such conflict and so ill prepared,

if we turn her away, she'll go elsewhere for the veil; she'll become Augustinian, Carmelite, who knows what?"

"That's hardly likely. Besides, it doesn't concern me. Let me repeat: It is inappropriate that she take the veil here."

"But, Father," the nun said, raising her voice, losing control, "It's not a question, I should think, of whether or not this concerns you, but whether it concerns God!"

Father Aimery raised his eyes from the missal, fixing the Mother Superior with a long look that showed something akin to disdainful compassion.

"Zeal for the house of the Lord devours you, madame," he finally said, not without a note of irony. "Be careful. Your passions are running high. You haven't yet acquired sufficient deference for the opinions of others."

"I haven't learned to recognize an authority superior to God's," she said, beside herself.

"You think you're still in the home of your father the duke," the confessor went on, not seeming to have heard the interruption, "surrounded by your many slaves—"

"Enough!" cried the nun, rising like a serpent someone has stepped on. "Don't make fun of me. Don't take so much pleasure in pushing me to the limits. You don't know what I can do!"

Father Aimery looked at her with devastating coolness.

"You need rest, Sister," he answered, his voice extremely gentle. "You appear to have slept poorly. Send me this young girl after mass, and be kind enough to have the bells rung. It will be six soon."

Mother Saint Elizabeth left in silence, giving the priest a look that bristled with hate.

III

Father Aimery was too perceptive not to see that Nelida's unrest, listlessness, and imagined calling grew from an awakening youth mingled with a chaste nature, from an inchoate need for love that was in ascendance, and from a kind of mental hunger that was perhaps not receiving the nutrients it required. He moved the day of her First Communion forward, thinking with justification that such a holy cleansing of the soul would at least temporarily bring a calming of the senses. In his view, saving time meant saving the situation. Once back with her family, Mademoiselle de la Thieullaye would no longer be his or his order's responsibility. Then he could not be faulted for the extreme views to which the young enthusiast would inexorably be drawn, he believed, by her romantic imagination. He insisted that Nelida mingle much more in the lives of the other boarders. Ever submissive and moreover deprived for some time of conversations with the Mother Superior, who no longer came to her room, Mademoiselle de la Thieullaye stopped exercising the privileges once granted her and returned to the common rule.

One morning after study period, having lingered in class for a moment, she was about to join the other pupils in the courtyard and was looking to see where her regular companions were gathered when she heard raucous bursts of laughter broken by what she thought was the sound of a plaintive voice. Keen to learn the reason for such wild gaiety, she reached the long walkway cutting the group of lime trees in two and saw at the far end a scene that riveted her

attention. In the middle of the black uniformed dresses, a young girl, grotesquely decked out in rags of every color, was tied to a tree. The bizarre outfit and strange contortions of the poor girl were causing the continually erupting explosions of glee from her companions. Not yet understanding anything about this cruel game, Nelida could see from a distance the animated pantomimes of the boarders and their dance around the tree.

"What's happening?" she asked a young girl running by.

"Shhh!" the girl answered, stopping. "Don't tell on us. The supervisor was called to the visitors' room. No one's come to replace her, and we're making the most of it by having a heavenly bit of fun. I'm running to the vestiary for some shawls. We've dressed Claudine like the Queen of Sheba. She's crying—yelling—that it's a blessing. She's never been so hilarious. At first she tried to stop us, but she wasn't strong enough, and we've got her well tied to the big lime tree. We're about to give her some thistle bouquets and sing her some litanies we've made up."

And the boarder began singing as she moved away, *"Mystic little featherbrain, jolly head of gingerbread, lady of the lunatics. . . ."*

Revolted by the profanation and gripped with pity for the victim of such twisted hearts, Nelida rushed forward and soon came into view of the merry band, which stopped abruptly at her approach. At the school, Mademoiselle de la Thieullaye was accorded automatic respect.

"To be honest, ladies," she said, speaking to the forbidden dancers, "you've chosen a pastime that brings you little honor."

Not one of the fifteen- and sixteen-year-old young ladies uttered a sound. Nelida went straight to the devastated Claudine, with difficulty untied the ropes binding her, ripped off her trappings, and, taking her by the arm, led her away, announcing that if anything like this happened again, she would tell the Mother Superior and Father Aimery despite her hatred of informing. She was answered with a general silence.

When Nelida had moved beyond the group, the girl she had just freed suddenly halted, fell at Nelida's feet, hugged her knees, and dissolved into tears. From the time she entered the convent, Claudine de Montclair had been the students' favorite plaything. She was gentle and rather severely backward. At the age of ten, she had had brain fever, and only brutal means had healed her. Since then, nothing seemed to draw her from her stupor. Her parents had put her in the convent, hoping the change of environment and the regimen of communal life would help her. But her problem had only worsened. Faced with the malevolence of her companions, who delighted in increasing her weak mind's confusion, intimidated and stunned, she became less alert by the day. Soon the last glimmer of reason would have been extinguished if Nelida hadn't rescued her and pointedly made herself the girl's protector.

Claudine's raptures and the unusual ways in which she showed her gratitude challenge description. The more her intelligence was blocked to her, the more her heart gave itself over to devotion. She attached herself to Nelida like a faithful dog, following her everywhere, never letting her gaze wander, watching her slightest movement, and proudly rendering the services of a slave. One day, during the procession of the Holy Sacrament, seeing rose petals strewn in the priest's path, she became convinced the gesture was the greatest sign of veneration one might offer a loved one. From that moment on, Nelida couldn't step into the courtyard without Claudine, armed with a huge bouquet sent daily by parents eager to do her bidding, tossing jasmine, tuberose, carnations—the season's most beautiful flowers—at her benefactress's feet, delirious with joy when Nelida couldn't stop herself from smiling.

Little by little, by being willing to talk to her as if she could understand everything, Nelida thought she saw the girl's wandering mind pause and seem to look around for itself. Claudine had often shown a strong taste for music. Her voice was clear and true. She, with no memory for

anything, retained and sang amazingly well songs she had heard only once. Nelida reasoned that she should pave the way for Claudine's still-unsteady mind with very small steps that might blossom onto paths where thought encountered no jolt. She piled on music lessons, had Claudine taken into chapel choir, flattered her vanity with wildly exaggerated praise. After six months she had achieved remarkable results and even held out hope of making her beloved idiot fully sane when the day came for her to give up her pious work, leave the convent, and enter a dreaded, unknown life, where she herself would desperately need guidance and help.

IV

The sky was overcast, the air heavy. Eight days earlier, Mademoiselle de la Thieullaye had said good-bye to the girls at the boarding school. In keeping with convent practice, she had gone into retreat in her cell and seen no one other than Father Aimery. The Vicomtesse d'Hespel hadn't arranged a specific date to pick up her niece, but it was known it wouldn't be long. Seated pensively on her window ledge, Nelida let her eyes drift over the inert mass of lime trees whose wilting leaves bent earthward under the weight of the stormy air, then over the gathering clouds, then to Claudine walking up and down the hollyhock-lined pathway, notebook in hand, reciting lines she was learning for examinations. Every time she passed under Nelida's window, she stopped, looked up sadly, and blew her a kiss. Nelida smiled and fell back into reverie. Suddenly the rumbling of a coach on the cobblestones of the courtyard and the sound of a footrest being snapped into position made her tremble. She had no doubt it was the vicomtesse. Indeed, two minutes later, she was informed that Madame the Mother Superior awaited her in the visitors' room. Mechanically, Nelida picked up her hat and shawl, went down the stairs, and crossed the corridors, holding her head up with difficulty. Her eyes were full of tears. She was almost overcome when the nun accompanying her opened the door to the visitors' room and she found herself in the presence of her aunt and Mother Saint Elizabeth. The vicomtesse moved forward to kiss her, but the Mother Superior, stepping between them, took Nelida's hand. With an authoritative air, she led the trembling girl to

the crucifix, which sanctified even this secular room. There, kneeling with her, she said in a firm but profoundly altered voice, "Let us pray—pray together for perhaps the last time. Let us ask God, my child, that in leaving this holy asylum you don't also leave your respect for his law and your faithfulness to his love. You're entering a world in which one or the other all too often is violated. May you always remain as you are at this moment, Nelida—pure of heart, filled with heavenly things! At this time of deep personal sorrow for me, gather up all the strength of your soul and receive God's blessing, which I now call forth on you and your future."

The nun stood up. With a gesture of sad and weary majesty, like an abdicating queen, she lifted her hand above Nelida, who was bathed in tears, blessing her in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

"To tell the truth," said the vicomtesse, hurrying into the elegant coach waiting for her at the base of the outdoor stairway, "those nuns are peculiar women. One might think you're going to live among the heathens! Thanks heavens that's not the case. I believe I'm as good a Christian as anyone. No one could observe the rules more precisely."

Nelida was still pensive. The coach had stopped at the outer iron gate, slowly opening on its hinges. A slender branch of white, newly clipped heather fell across the cushions. "Claudine!" Nelida cried out, lunging for the door. At that moment, the impatient horses bounded out of the gate and rapidly took the road to the Hespel estate.

"Ah, well, my child," said the vicomtesse, who hadn't noticed this event, preoccupied as she was with watching her horses rear up under the coachman's hand, "it's quite good, highly appropriate, that you displayed a little regret about leaving that Mother Superior, but now you can be happy. I've had adorable rooms prepared for you. You're going to have a maid entirely for yourself. The couturiere

and the seamstress are waiting to take your measurements and make you an entire wardrobe right away, because I'm anxious to see you get rid of this ridiculous black outfit. In a week I'll be accompanying you to the Austrian ambassador's ball. Cheer up, child, your finest years are just beginning."

The Vicomtesse d'Hespel, like all individuals of limited intellect, didn't doubt that what concerned her was not always of general interest and never noticed her listeners' lack of attention. This time once again she failed to see what was, nevertheless, almost impossible not to see—that Nelida, lost in profound sadness, hardly heard the flow of her words and would have been utterly unable to repeat their meaning. The coach stopped at the peristyle surrounding the Hespel estate. The lackeys, wearing their finest livery, had gathered to welcome their young mistress. The vicomtesse and Nelida passed before the large assemblage, climbed the stairway covered with carpets and shrubs, and Madame d'Hespel, eager to enjoy her niece's surprise, ushered her into the chambers destined for her. The room was octagonal, its walls hung with transparent, rose-lined gauze, accented at intervals with tassels, pom-poms, braids, and other items of highly doubtful taste. A huge, heavily gilded, full-length mirror took up the main panel. A sofa and armchairs in white velvet, strewn with bouquets of embossed roses, had struck the vicomtesse as things of surpassing elegance to delight the eye. An ermine fur tossed in front of the rose bed, bookshelves covered with porcelain, crystal, and all manner of knickknacks completed the dainty, studied quality of the room, highly unsuitable for someone as serious as Nelida.

A connection always exists, although we may often be unaware of it, between exterior objects and our innermost being. Line, form, color, sound, scent, light, and shadow are each notes of a mysterious harmony that acts on the soul, either to produce comfort and satisfaction when that harmony blends like a judicious accompaniment with the interior melody of thought and feeling, or to produce a grating disharmony and conflict between the two spheres. Nelida

felt very unpleasantly oppressed by all this inappropriate luxury. Nevertheless, seeing her aunt's simple joy and tender eagerness, she forced herself to express gratitude, stammering several appreciative words whose clumsiness was credited, in the vicomtesse's eyes, with the excessive admiration to be expected from someone coming from a boarding school.

The rest of that day and the days to come were spent running from store to store to buy a little velvet, a ribbon, a bit of lace. Madame d'Hespel each afternoon regularly made the rounds of the fashionable shops, even when she had no purchases in mind. She enjoyed the conversation of the shopkeepers and their deferential flattery, and when she met one of her friends in a store, the shared advice, the views on the lines of a shoulder cape, the opinion of a hat seen the preceding day on an unknown woman animated their discussion to such a degree that they often forgot everything else until mealtime. It was during these encounters over bolts of unfolded fabrics, with hairstyles being tried out, amid the deafening chatter of young women behind counters that Nelida got to know the grand ladies of Saint-Germain Quarter, receiving a fundamental and indelible impression of the society in which she was expected to live.

The day of the ball arrived. In spite of her aunt's displeasure and the insistence of the couturieres, Nelida had managed to be groomed in perfect simplicity. Her hair, despite the fad for frizzes and curls, fell in smooth bands on either side of her forehead. She adamantly refused to color her pale cheeks with a little rouge and refused to lay any necklace on her slender shoulders. Just as she was climbing into the carriage, someone noticed that she didn't have a corsage, prompting a visit to the most prominent flower shop. All supplies were exhausted. The vicomtesse became furious. In spite of the excuses of the merchant, who blamed the situation on a boy just hired the day before, the aunt was threatening to close down the merchant's business when Nelida, who during this discussion and in hopes of placat-

ing her aunt had searched every corner for flowers fresh enough to make a passable bouquet, spied in the middle of a water bucket into which plants had been tossed helter-skelter a beautiful water lily that leaned its melancholy head languidly over a vase. At the sight, a long-buried memory surged upward. She remembered Hespel pond, the rowboat under the willows, the bird nest, and, above all, the fence so valliantly climbed by her village boyfriend. These spontaneous images called forth a powerful response. She grabbed the water lily, dried its wet stem on her fine batiste handkerchief, and, slipping it under her belt, announced that she found this flower delightful and that she would have chosen none other in the most well-furnished greenhouse of the rarest plants. The whim was odd, but this was no moment to be difficult, since time was running out. Without much protest, the vicomtesse climbed back into her carriage and ten minutes later entered the ambassadorial drawing rooms with her niece.

The presentation of Mademoiselle de la Thieullaye had been announced. The entry of such an heiress into society was no small event. Therefore, when the vicomtesse appeared, decked out, dolled up, plumed, gleaming with makeup and fluffy with lace, every conversation stopped and each individual fell silent to see the newcomer more clearly. Enthralled with the effect she was producing, Madame d'Hespel moved through several rooms, smiling at some, extending her hand to others, making signals with her fan, her trimmings catching on the men's medals, followed by Nelida, pale and solemn, who beheld without curiosity or emotion what was utterly new to her: a sparkling celebration.

"She's quite beautiful," several men said.

"But without the least expression," noted an aging beauty.

"Why doesn't her aunt put a little rouge on her?" added a woman with varicose veins.

"She kept it all for herself!" responded a young dandy. "Haven't you ever noticed how the vicomtesse adds freshness

and bloom as the years go by? Every winter I detect an even more alluring creaminess to her skin—the better to highlight its ruin. For a month now she's definitely been turning into a show rose from China."

Provoking these and similar remarks along her way, the vicomtesse took her position in the ballroom. She looked forward to introducing Nelida to several young people of the girl's own age, including a young woman named Hortense Langin, who seemed the belle of the ball.

"She's a lawyer's daughter," the vicomtesse said in an undertone to her niece. "But she's received as if she were named Duras or La Tremoille. First, because she's extremely well-to-do and her father has done important favors for some of us; then, also because she's lively and understands her situation to perfection. Her father's estate is a heartbeat from ours. For you, this will be a useful relationship."

Mademoiselle Langin showered Nelida with attention. She told her the names of the best male dancers while pointing out the flaws of certain of their fashionable partners. Nelida found her friendly manner charming. Before the ball was over, beautiful Hortense, delighted to champion a newcomer, assured everyone that she was intimately connected with Mademoiselle de la Thieullaye and that she was going to see her all the time.

How strange the world appears in the eyes of a sensitive creature, at least how strange that part of the social world—opulent, glorious, reserved for aristocratic pleasures—generally acknowledged to be the arbiter of propriety, the guardian of elegant and honorable behavior. In magnificent disdain, considering nothing beyond itself, it presumes to appoint itself *society* par excellence—so thoroughly has it deemed everything else unworthy of attention and interest! What an assortment of inconsistencies and anomalies! What an extraordinary fusion of seemingly irreconcilable theories and practices! By what prodigious art this edifice of prejudice and lies remains standing, with every dilapidated part on the verge of collapse yet still seeming to be an imposing mass! This society affirms itself to be Christian; it assures us that the education it gives the young, as it renews itself from generation to generation, agrees in all respects with the teachings of the Gospel. It exults in that presumed agreement, pretending not to notice that Christ's word is the strong condemnation of its own animating spirit. The carpenter's son preached the scorn for wealth, the vanity of pleasure, the hollowness of greatness. The world openly engages in the avid pursuit of all these counterfeit goods, in the blind cult of opinion, in the intemperate regard for honors and fortune. The contradiction is so deeply embedded in social behavior that it creates no complication—not even doubt. It's controlled and organized to everyone's satisfaction. The rule of the Gospel, followed uncompromis-

ingly, would weigh too heavily. The century's vices, unveiled, would be appalling. A simple adjustment fixes everything. Jesus's language is preserved, as are Satan's vanities, and the works of both. The Church has its day, the Tempter his. Christian charity isn't practiced, but almsgiving is. Renunciation doesn't occur, but abstinence does. Duelling is honored, but suicide vilified. People throng to the theater but refuse burial to the actor. They stone the adulteress but lift the seducer in triumph. Who wouldn't be amazed to consider with what prodigal Phariseeism society has managed to interpret and falsify the meaning of Holy Scripture? What tolerance for hypocritical vice, what rigidity for genuine passion! How few condemnations of clever vanity and circumspect dalliance! But love, should it dare appear, how heaped with abominations! Love? We needn't worry about it showing up. It's banished like some grotesque infirmity, banished from its most pure sanctuary: the very heart of a young woman. Even before birth, it's smothered by cupidity and conceit, which pervert every instinct, including the most natural, the most legitimate, the most religious of all: the desire for happiness in marriage.

It was impossible for Nelida's serious mind, delicate soul, and honest character not to be distressed by the sham of this society that was now her own. But youth is slow to realize its own impressions and slow to transform them into judgment. Exceptional force is required for someone to be ripped from custom's yoke. Conventional wisdom quite naturally seems to be respectable wisdom, and even the most resolute minds are filled with doubt when they feel bound to step outside the circle drawn by words as solemn as those of religion, family, and honor: words three times holy, in whose periphery society has placed things least worthy of veneration and sacrifice. And so, surprised and uncertain, Nelida vainly sought a way to connect what she saw and heard with the interior voice of her conscience. At one moment she felt drawn by charms so noble as to seem al-

most virtuous; at another she was repulsed by vulgar hypocrisies or selfishly cynical mottoes. The conversations of the young women with whom she was connected were merely a looser version of those at the convent, and the insipid flattery of the young men at the ball undermined her uncomplicated sense of self worth, leaving her without a response. An overwhelming anxiety engulfed her; her discouraged heart opened itself once more to a yearning for religious life.

"I would like to see the Mother Superior," Nelida announced one afternoon as she entered, highly agitated and pale, at the pivoting, wooden turnaround of the Convent of the Annonciade.

The elderly gatekeeper, who at first didn't recognize her, put on her glasses and looked again carefully:

"Ah, it's you, Mademoiselle Nelida," she said in a strained voice. "You want to see Mother Saint Elizabeth? She's not here. That is, she's not well," she added, visibly embarrassed. "But if you'd like to see Mother Saint Frances Xavier, or Mother of the Sacred Heart, or Mother of Grace—"

As she was talking, the interior door opened and Claudine appeared.

"Nelida!" she shouted in a tone of voice that issued from the gut. She dropped a large portfolio she held in her hand.

Running to Nelida, she threw her arms around her with such force that they both nearly fell over, covering her with kisses, squealing with joy.

"Mademoiselle Claudine!" cried the gatekeeper, her voice gravelly, "Mademoiselle Claudine, what's gotten into you? Now pick up your drawings, mademoiselle. Come on—be reasonable. Mademoiselle Claudine, you're going to get a black mark. Go on back to class, mademoiselle."

Nothing worked. The nun was wasting her breath when, all of a sudden, she fell silent and bowed respectfully, seeing the figure of Father Aimery close by. The priest's presence accomplished what the flood of the gatekeeper's words could not; Claudine ran to pick up her drawings, then, without

raising her eyes, moved on, confused and mute, to hide in a dark corner of the vestibule. Nelida walked toward the Reverend Father.

"Well, here you are, my child!" he said to her affectionately. "It's been a long time since we've seen you. That isn't a criticism of you but a regret for us. I know we have nothing but praise to give you since your departure from the convent."

"Father," said Nelida, "I've come often, asking to see Mother Saint Elizabeth. I've always been told she couldn't see me."

"She's inspecting our provincial establishments," Father Aimery said curtly.

"Especially today, Father, I very much wanted to see her. I wanted to talk to her about something I wouldn't dare trouble you with."

"Come, my dear girl," said the confessor. "What's more important for me than listening to my children and bringing, if I can, light to their minds? Follow me to the sacristy. We can talk freely there."

Having said that, Father Aimery entered the interior of the convent by a little doorway through the great wall, and Nelida followed him, waving goodbye to Claudine, who had remained motionless the whole time, as if planted, her eyes riveted on Nelida.

The priest walked in silence down a dim, narrow hallway, Nelida a few steps behind. As they approached the sacristy, she felt her heart pound with anxiety. Strength failed her. Twice she stopped, uncertain whether to go back and avoid, whatever the cost, this conversation she had unwittingly set in motion. Confessing her sins had never created dread in her, but she now felt an overpowering reluctance to confide a young woman's secrets to a man, to discuss marriage with a priest. A fine instinct for propriety warned her that, in what she was about to express and the advice she was about to hear, something would be left unsaid, some-

thing nevertheless understood, something about which only a woman should have spoken. At the thought of it, shame rose to her face, and she looked for some subterfuge to escape the difficulty, some made-up confession that might spare her the real one, when daylight entered the corridor. The priest had just opened the sacristy door and was saying, in a voice nature had made haughty and dry but practice had turned into a honeyed caress, "Enter, child; here no one will bother us."

Nothing had changed in the sacristy since the day Mother Saint Elizabeth had come to announce Mademoiselle de la Thieullaye's calling to Father Aimery, except that it was now colder and even more damp because it was September and the sun's pale rays scarcely penetrated the thick stained-glass windows. Nelida sat on a stool that Father Aimery placed parallel to his armchair in such a way that they might speak without looking at each other, as in a confessional.

"Are you cold, my child?" he asked the young girl, seeing her clutch her velvet mantilla over her chest. "Would you like me to have the gatekeeper bring the heater?"

"No, thank you, Father," said Nelida, trying to control the shivering of her body.

"You don't seem well, child," said the confessor, taking Nelida's soft hand in his own wrinkled one. "Something's bothering you. Is there a family problem? Are you having difficulty practicing your religion?"

"Not at all," Nelida said, a little comforted to see that the confessor, with his questions, spared her the first awkwardness. "My aunt is very good for me and gives me total freedom."

"You're not bored, I suppose," the Reverend Father continued. "You know how to stay busy, and, besides, you probably have all too many distractions in the world where you're being led."

"I'm not bored, Father." And Nelida's hand, icy when the confessor took it, became wet. Her pulse, hardly evident

before, pounded wildly. The priest thought he grasped the situation.

"You perhaps have, my child," he said, speaking more slowly and lowering his voice, "some wish, some personal preference? Have you made some choice of which your relatives disapprove?"

"Oh, no, Father!" Nelida cried vehemently. The idea of being suspected of a guilty sentiment gave all her courage back. "They want me to marry, Father."

"Well, my dear girl," the confessor said with a small, half-malicious smile on his lips, squeezing the hand he still held, "I don't see anything greatly distressing in that. Especially if, as I suspect, it's a matter of an appropriate match, such as you might be expected to make."

"They want to have me marry the son of the Duc de Valmer, whom I've never seen," said Nelida.

"He's a very great lord," answered Father Aimery, not paying attention to the last part of the sentence. "He has a considerable fortune, they say. Well, my dear girl, I offer my most sincere congratulations. You see, Providence is always fair. It's rewarding you, just the way our daily prayers were requesting and just as you deserve, because you're a good and devout child, Nelida."

"Father," replied the girl hesitantly, unconsciously pulling her hand away from the priest's, "is it right, then, is it permissible, to marry a man one doesn't know?"

"But Monsieur de Valmer is not an unknown man," responded the priest. "It must be easy to gather information, and I suppose your aunt hasn't neglected to make inquiries—"

"But it's me!" Nelida interrupted, "*I've* never met him, Father. I wouldn't even know his face."

"They aren't saying that he's physically deformed or that he has some repulsive vice?"

"I've heard of nothing like that," Nelida said, "but how can I make a lifelong commitment, how can I promise to love him? Do I know whether that will be possible?"

"You will love him, my child," the confessor answered. "You're too mature and well bred to do otherwise. You'll be grateful to him for the honorable status he has given you in society and for the satisfactions of your new life. If he has flaws—and who doesn't—you'll bear them with resignation because you're a Christian, and you'll make every effort, through your goodness and your prayers, to make him a better man."

Nelida remained silent. What could she have said? What did she know about life and love? Father Aimery talked on. To the timid objections she ventured he countered first with a description of the advantages so elevated a position would give her in society. Soon noticing, however, that considerations of that nature had little hold on the girl's serious mind, he asked her to picture marriage from an austere and spiritual angle. He described it as he saw it, from the lofty heights of theology, and as the catechism defined it, as a sacrament intended to provide children for the church. Used to viewing the pleasures of love as coarse necessities or guilty caprices, he assaulted the girl's secret instincts with the power of his logic. He was forceful and erudite, if not eloquent. He invoked experience, reason, the church Fathers. He exhorted Nelida to show her strength, to lift herself above the miseries of the flesh. He made her ashamed, as if for a weakness, of this unprovoked sorrow, of this warning voice from nature, and when he left to give his customary lecture to the novices, he left her troubled and gloomy but resigned to her sacrifice.

The plans for marriage to the Marquis de Valmer were broken off following difficulties among the lawyers. Mademoiselle de la Thieullaye felt neither joy nor pain. She had made a steadfast decision to bow to convention, which the priest had presented as supreme law. She allowed herself no further reflection. The man of God had spoken. She surrendered to his word as to the infallible expression of divine will.

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VI

Some time later, Nelida was riding one afternoon in an open carriage with her aunt in the Bois de Boulogne. The vicomtesse had specified an extremely slow pace along the main road that would allow spectators, for the first time, the opportunity to admire the pair of spirited young horses her coachman had harnessed. But few people were out. The weather was unsettled, the air rather sharp. Without wanting to admit it, Madame d'Hespel was out of sorts and slumped sullenly on her cushions, not opening her mouth. Nelida watched little whirlwinds of dust and dead leaves race to catch the north wind. She listened to the distant hum of Paris mingle strangely with the natural harmonies of the countryside, the songs of birds, the snapping of branches, and was about to lose herself in the serene horizons of Mount Valerian. Suddenly, the sound of a horse's hooves beside the carriage drew an exclamation from the vicomtesse:

"Monsieur de Kervaens!" she shouted, leaning over the carriage door to follow the fleet horseman with her look.

"Who is it?" Nelida asked, not having heard this name before.

As Madame d'Hespel was about to answer, a very distinguished-looking young man on a handsome Arabian mare drew near. Reining his horse with a firm and easy hand, with the other he raised his cap in polished grace; bowing slightly, he said, "I scarcely hope, Madame La Vicomtesse, that you deign to recognize me."

"At this very moment I was saying your name to my niece," answered Madame d'Hespel, gesturing in a way that

approximated an introduction, "and I was asking myself the same question. You've been gone from Paris, if I'm not mistaken, for four years, and four years, at my age," she continued, simpering, "is an eternity. I've changed frightfully. You return to find me decidedly old."

The Count of Kervaens, the whole time fixing his piercing gaze on Nelida, heard nothing or pretended not to hear. The vicomtesse was forced to add:

"And are you back this time *for good?*"

"*For good*, indeed, madame," the count replied. "My wanderings are drawing to a close. I've just bought a small place on your street. I go to Brittany constantly to set up my old manor there, renegotiate the lease agreements, which haven't been raised in twenty years, and hunt down a scoundrel of a manager who's robbed me disgracefully, so they write me. You see in me a perfectly commendable man."

"So tell me what you've been doing these four years?"

"What I've been doing, madame," Monsieur de Kervaens answered, caressing his mount's fine neck with his elegant hand, whose glove he had casually removed, "would take a long time to tell. I've traveled like the Mona Lisa, like Childe Harold, like the wandering Jew. I've seen Italy, Greece, Constantinople, Russia, and even, along the way, a little of Denmark—on my word of honor! I've looked deeply and concluded that men everywhere are equally dull but women are nowhere more charming than in Paris. That's why I've come back."

A smile flitted across Nelida's serious lips.

"I see you haven't changed," the vicomtesse said, "still sarcastic, still—"

"Would you allow me to pay my respects?" Monsieur de Kervaens interrupted.

"Not only would I allow it, I invite you to come tomorrow. We're having guests and can dance a bit."

"Might the young lady save a waltz for me?" asked Monsieur de Kervaens, curious at last to hear the voice of this silent, beautiful young lady.

"I never waltz, monsieur," Nelida answered.

"My child," the vicomtesse said, "I've never chosen to oppose you until now, but tomorrow, at my house, you may not be excused from waltzing. You must liven up the ball. Besides—" and the vicomtesse leaned and whispered in her niece's ear, "I beg of you—no strait-laced affectations!"

"I'll waltz with you, monsieur," Nelida said in a tone of complete simplicity.

Monsieur de Kervaens bowed, then, following an almost imperceptible gesture of his hand, his horse galloped away. Nelida listened intently to the steady, cadenced beat of its hooves on the trodden ground of the now-empty road.

"He is simply the most delightful boy in all of France!" cried the vicomtesse, now cheerful and merry. "Before he left, no one was more popular. He's thoughtful, knows all the social graces, and—just as a little bonus—understands business matters splendidly."

The first floor of the Hespel estate, functioning as receiving rooms, was admirably suited for a ball. The vicomtesse, in whom one might have vainly searched for the least shred of innate good taste—which, in refined sensibilities, is nothing more than a need for harmony—and who also lacked the artistic taste that comes from aesthetic study, possessed on the other hand an instinct for pleasure and a genius for excess. She excelled at organizing ordinary parties that didn't require knowing the tastes and dispositions of each guest or giving the kind of personal touch to make each guest feel special. She had always moved in the best company. No expense was too great. In a city like Paris, nothing more is necessary for miracles to happen.

That evening her drawing rooms in white stucco laden with gold sparkled with more splendor than usual. Multitudes of chandeliers of faceted rock crystal shimmered and were reflected to infinity in the mirrored panels along the walls, casting a lively brilliance over the richly colored damask curtains. Pyramids of cactuses, opening their fiery blossoms to the warm air, added still more to the eye's dazzlement. A

sprightly orchestra made the rooms hum and resonate with beguiling music as women in their short, tapered jackets arrived with perfumed hair, cascades of jewels, bare arms, bare shoulders, and one by one were escorted inside, like fairies gathering for a happy enchantment.

"You are truly incredibly pretty this evening," Hortense Langin said to Nelida as the two withdrew to a dressing room apart from the suffocating air of the ballroom. "You outshine all the rest of us."

Nelida had never been so beautiful. She wore a skirt of blue taffeta glazed with white, tucked up on one side with a bouquet of fresh jasmine. A garland of the same flowers encircled her forehead. The bouquet's fragile leaves, extending a little past the wreath, cast a slight, evanescent shadow over her alabaster skin. A long, flowing belt gracefully revealed the pure curves of her girlish figure. A certain appealing languor tempered her usually serious expression. Nothing more ethereal, more chaste, more unspoiled could be imagined. She seemed almost to be enveloped in a diaphanous substance partially veiling and protecting her from predatory looks.

"I'm undoubtedly rude to interrupt so charming a conversation," said Monsieur de Kervaens, who appeared at that moment at the dressing-room door.

"Well, there you are, finally," said Hortense, holding her hand out to him, which he shook in the English style while he bowed respectfully to Mademoiselle de la Thieullaye. "I had given up on you, and I don't know if I still have a waltz for you."

She checked her ivory booklet, the kind in which the most popular dancers keep a record of their partners' names. Monsieur de Kervaens casually lifted it from her hands and read, "Prince Alberti, Marquis d'Hevas. . . ."

"I'm relieved to see that you haven't *broken form* during my absence," he told her in a playfully sarcastic tone, looking at Nelida, who was smiling. "But don't count on me,

kind Hortense. I've grown old; I'm twenty-nine. I'm now elderly and no longer dance."

Nelida looked at him in surprise. She hadn't forgotten the waltz promised the day before in the Bois de Boulogne, and had even been much concerned about it, since she had never waltzed and was a little afraid of a first effort in front of so many people.

"Or at least," Monsieur de Kervaens continued, "I dance only under certain conditions and never more than once during a ball."

"You're speaking riddles to me, Monsieur Timoleon," said Mademoiselle Langin, somewhat irritated.

The conversation was interrupted by the orchestra playing a *ritornello,* indicating a three-quarter measure.

"Might I hope it will be this one?" said Monsieur de Kervaens, approaching Nelida. His voice abruptly took on a tender, almost pleading quality.

"If that pleases you, monsieur," she answered, rising. Timoleon offered his arm. Mademoiselle Langin remained nonplussed until, happily, her dance partner arrived, putting an end to her distress. The two couples made their way through the crowd toward the ballroom.

"You don't realize, monsieur, that I've never waltzed," Nelida said to Monsieur de Kervaens. "This will be my first lesson, and I fear—"

"Don't fear what fills me with delight," Timoleon interrupted.

"But I'll be very awkward, very embarrassed."

"I'll have confidence enough for both of us, because at this moment I'm bursting with pride. Don't be afraid. Trust me. Follow my lead, and everything will be fine."

They had come into the circle of dancers. As Timoleon placed his arm around Nelida's waist, she stepped backward, as if to escape an unfamiliar touch.

"And first of all," continued Monsieur de Kervaens, "since for the moment you grant me the authority of a

dancing master, please don't stiffen up like that. On the contrary, you must let yourself go completely."

And he twirled her around as she allowed herself to be lifted along rather than be led.

"That's incredible, I promise you! A few more lessons, and you'll be the finest waltzer in Paris. But don't be afraid to rest your arm on my shoulder. It gives me more confidence, more freedom to lead you. And, also (this is for the gallery watching us), don't lower your head quite so much. You'll just have to look at me from time to time."

And Timoleon fixed his infatuated eyes on those of the uneasy young woman. He was so bold as to squeeze her supple waist gently; and his hand, without closing over hers, held and captivated it by a kind of magnetism. As they continued to skim over the floor at an ever-increasing pace, as the music's sound and commanding rhythms pulled Nelida out of herself, dazing, dizzying her, the overwhelmed girl, panting, pushed by an irresistible force inside a swirl of light and sound, felt the jasmine's treacherous exhalations and Timoleon's ever-closer, hot breath as he pulled her to him. At one point, to avoid colliding with a pair of waltzers who had strayed out of position, he grabbed her so strongly and drew her to him so roughly that their faces almost touched. Nelida felt the man's hot, damp hair on her pale forehead. She saw his burning eyes plunge into her. A deep shiver ran through her body. She was overcome by this embrace, this look to which she had been turned over, and her half-parted lips and fading voice murmured words Timoleon drank like wine, like a confession of love, "Hold me up and lead me away from here; I might faint."

He stopped suddenly and, without giving her time to recover, pulled her, almost carried her to the dressing room where he had found her with Hortense. The alarmed vicomtesse, who had seen them pass, came rushing over.

"Here's your aunt," Timoleon said, seating Nelida on the divan. "I'll leave you with her. For God's sake—" he

added in an undertone, "never waltz with anyone but me. I believe it would drive me mad."

The rest of the evening went by without Monsieur de Kervaens, guided by a refined sense of tact, trying to approach Nelida, even on the plausible pretext of apologizing to her. Nelida felt grateful to him. She didn't dance again, went up to her room before the ball was over, and fell into a troubled sleep from which she awoke several times, thinking she saw Timoleon coming into her room.

"Let's make up," Monsieur de Kervaens was saying to Mademoiselle Langin, eating ice cream near a table filled with a vermillion platter of the most exquisite delicacies, the most succulent fruits, the rarest early produce to defy blasé palates and finicky tastes. "You know how I despise jealousy."

"Answer me," Mademoiselle Langin continued in a clipped tone. "Are you planning to marry her?"

"I wasn't thinking about anything just then. It's you, with your ridiculous fights, who make me think about her. Besides, what difference could it possibly make to you? She or someone else, there will always be someone."

"Why not me?" Hortense said with a cynicism that contrasted strangely with her youthful face and the modest air she had learned to assume in the society to which she had been admitted.

"My dear child," answered Monsieur de Kervaens, playing with the fan Hortense had laid on the buffet table, "I've told you again and again; it's a misfortune, but what can I do? I'm steeped in prejudice. And never—this is certain—if it were Venus herself, Venus blessed with all the wisdom of Minerva—never would I agree to marry a woman who could not put a double coat of arms on her carriage."

There was a moment of silence.

"It won't be easy," Hortense said, pursuing the line of his thought. "Nelida is a romantic. She'll insist on being loved."

"So?" Timoleon said.

"She won't believe you. Your reputation is too well known. But wait a second—" Hortense added, lowering her voice as several groups approached the buffet table. "For you, I'd do anything. Would you like me to do it? She listens to me. As smart as she is, she's unbelievably naive. But on one condition—"

Realizing that others were listening, they returned to the ballroom.

From that day on, Timoleon, with Madame d'Hespel's tacit approval, saw Mademoiselle de la Thieullaye almost daily. He used every resource of mind and experience offered by his associations with women to please and persuade her that he had felt from the beginning a sudden and profound passion.

It was only a partial lie. Jaded by success, fed up with easy morality and salon wit, tired of the good and bad company he ultimately deemed equally insipid, equally devoid of truth and fantasy, Timoleon was strongly attracted to this sincere nature who borrowed nothing from outside and revealed, under a veil of proud chastity, the most romantic raptures. Nelida's beauty charmed him, her aloof air flattered his aristocratic tastes. Moreover, for him it was a superb match. He made up his mind and soon was thinking of himself as seriously smitten. Mademoiselle Langin, recognizing clearly that there remained no hope whatsoever for her own marriage and judging that the best means of keeping Monsieur de Kervaens' friendship—important to her vanity—was to help him in this matter, applied herself with consummate skill. Less would have sufficed to seduce a woman as loving, as unguarded as Nelida. She didn't for a single moment question Timoleon's tenderness. Worldly men of wit lift amorous intrigue to the level of genius. Using their gifts for no other purpose than to gain approval,

focusing all their ambition on a single point—to please women—because approval by the fair sex constitutes the unique superiority recognized by the salons, they thereby rise to a level of art worthy of admiration. The ingenious grace of their efforts, their constant and minute attentions, seemingly impossible from anything other than a profoundly touched heart, produce, at least for a while, the illusion of true love.

Nelida believed she was privileged among women when, on his knees, Timoleon begged in carefully chosen, tender words for the right to devote his life to her. In blind assurance she gave herself over, from that day forward, to the sweetness of loving and being loved.

Madame d'Hespel, ecstatic about this marriage that allowed her to be seen with the most elegant young couple in Paris, rushed to announce the news to all society, while Monsieur de Kervaens went to Brittany to take care of business and ready the château for his new bride. Nelida confided her happy fate to Father Aimery. She was deeply distressed not to be able to see Mother Saint Elizabeth, who was still absent. And, in her preoccupation with her own heart, she made the regrettable mistake of forgetting to ask for her poor friend, Claudine de Montclair.

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Part Two

VII

One morning Madame d'Hespel and Nelida were having tea in the dining room that faced the garden. An English breakfast lay on the table. The vicomtesse's spaniels were leaping onto the chairs and yapping impertinently to get bits of muffin or sandwich that she was meting out with unusual indulgence when a servant brought her a visitor's card, adding that the individual was present and waiting.

"Well, of course, of course!" exclaimed Madame d'Hespel. "Have him come right in. It's Guermann Regnier. You remember, Nelida—the son of the neighbor who sent us the luscious apricots off her tree. He must be a big boy now, that little rascal. He'll get lost in the streets of Paris, but it's a good sign that he's coming to see us."

As she spoke, the door opened and an extremely handsome young man entered, bowing deeply. Not getting up, the vicomtesse held out her hand. He came to her and raised her hand to his lips. Nelida looked at him, her curiosity mixed with embarrassment as she struggled to recognize in this young man of towering height, pensive demeanor, and noble brow the little village boy of country charm she had once known.

"Welcome, my child, and first of all, sit here, near me. Down, Djett! Down!" said the vicomtesse, giving a little swat of her fingertips to her favorite spaniel, who was in no hurry

to surrender his spot. "How you've grown! And really so good looking! Who would have thought? And your dear mother, how's her rheumatism? And her apricot tree, is it still fifteen days ahead of the one at Hespel? Why have you come to Paris? To play—but not too much, I hope; you must be sensible, my child. And you must come see us often. You'll always find a place set for you here, dear Guermann."

It was a ten-minute flood of patronizing sentiments that didn't allow Guermann a chance to utter a word. Several times he suppressed a slight smile.

"You're too good, madame," he finally said, profiting from a moment when the dogs, become even more demanding at being ignored in his presence, forced their mistress's attention. "My mother is doing wonderfully well and sends you her respectful greetings. As for me, I've been in Paris for some time. If I haven't had the honor of paying my respects before now, it's because constant work, almost beyond my strength, has taken all my time. I have to earn a living so as not to be a burden to my mother—who, as you know, is far from rich—as well as work to develop a talent. I must both study and produce—that is, I must become an artist, which is my calling, and yet remain a craftsman. My precarious existence depends on it. My life hasn't been easy. Fortunately, as you know all too well, madame, I've been a stubborn and unruly child—one of those boys who turn into persevering men immune to hardship. I've also been lucky enough to meet a teacher who encourages me constantly. For five years I've been working in the atelier of—"

"You're a painter," interrupted the vicomtesse. "Ah, I congratulate you! That's wonderful. Do you paint watercolors or miniatures?"

"I hope to do historical tableaux," answered the young man with calm assurance. "Up to now, I've painted a little of everything. I've had to conform to the taste of buyers and yield to their demands—which are extremely harsh for anyone with no reputation yet—and I've just finished the only

two canvases I can truly call my own: the portrait of my mother and Goethe's 'Fisherman.' The purpose of my visit, madame, is to ask if you would be willing to honor my atelier with your presence. Yesterday my teacher saw fit to climb the seven floors to my apartment and assures me he'll not go back on his word."

"With the greatest pleasure, my child. We'll go tomorrow, Nelida and I. And if you've done beautiful work—as I'm sure you have—and if your prices aren't too high, I'll send all my acquaintances, and you'll probably have some good commissions in no time."

Having said that, she finished her tea and stood up to go into the garden when she was informed that her couturiere had been waiting for some time and requested her instructions. Nelida and Guermann, who had not yet spoken, were left alone on the exterior flight of steps.

"Being a great artist must be a wonderful life," Nelida said as they walked down the stairs. (Something warned her that she needed to repair her aunt's well-intentioned tactlessness.) "Did you already feel drawn to painting when we played together at Hespel?"

This *we*, reestablishing equality—almost intimacy—between herself and Guermann, came naturally to the young woman's lips as the most indirect and refined of peace offerings.

The artist understood her meaning because, at that very moment, Nelida's foot slipped on the last step, and Guermann grabbed her arm to hold her steady. He squeezed her perhaps a little longer than was necessary.

"I've always loved to study the horizon's beautiful lines. Even as a child, my eyes were fascinated by the play of light on foliage," he continued. "At the time you're remembering, I'd already tried again and again to reproduce shapes that fascinated me. I had drawn, or at least thought I was drawing, tree trunks, resting animals, the Gothic portico of our old church. But the first time I felt joy in my work, the first day I felt an inner stirring, a calling—forgive me for using a word that might seem too ambitious—it

was—do you remember the day I stole a branch of cherries for you?"

"Most certainly," Nelida said, plunging with Guermann inside a long arbor of ivy and Virginia creeper. "You were a real scamp back then and I a poor little crybaby."

"You know what a harsh scolding they gave you. Your aunt let my mother know the full extent of her displeasure. I was informed that I was no longer welcome at the château, since I had lured you into disobedience. I was indignant, with a heart full of rage, and thought about nothing but revenge. For days and nights I made up and discarded, one by one, a whole range of laughable projects that seemed to me to be very easily accomplished, at least while I was as furious as I was then. The mildest involved nothing less than burning down Hespel château, kidnapping you from the flames, and resolutely killing everyone who dared block my way—don't forget I was thirteen at the time! These bouts of rage were devastating. Before long it was grief, quieter but maybe more extreme, that took the upper hand. I made a calm—I would even say religious—decision to hold on to something of you that no one in the world could ever take away from me: your image."

"How do you mean?" Nelida asked, now keenly interested.

"Will you promise not to be offended?" Guermann asked. "Children—and to some degree artists—aren't always responsible for their actions."

"Is what you have to confess so terrible as all that?" Nelida asked with a smile.

"You be the judge," Guermann answered. "Or, rather—don't. Don't judge anything. Let me benefit instead from the full range of your compassion."

"Aren't we old friends? Mutual compassion is what holds all true friendship together."

"I had inherited a portfolio from my father. I took it out of a desk, where I'd carefully stored it, and went into the woods, along the same paths we'd taken together. I sat

by the same moat where you'd rested. There, putting my head in both hands and closing my eyes so that nothing else could distract me, for a long time I focused all my thoughts on you. I filled my whole being—if I might put it that way—with the memory of your high forehead, so proud, your beautiful hair, your sad and gentle look. I made a strange vow before God."

"What was it?" asked Nelida, more attentive than ever.

"Spare me from having to tell you," Guermann said, smiling sadly. "I'd never be able to do it. Then," he continued, "grabbing a pencil with an enthusiasm unbelievable in the kind of child I was then, I boldly drew a face: Admittedly, it was a long way from being as beautiful as yours, but to a knowing eye and a heart filled with you, it could create a moment's illusion and bring your presence back. When I'd finished, I felt a joy so intense, I was so carried away, that I fell to my knees in front of my own work, and my heart burst open in a flood of tears. When I tried to get up, my legs couldn't support me. My forehead was drenched in cold sweat. I was shaking all over. It was a huge struggle just to drag myself back to the village. They put me to bed, where I stayed for two weeks with fever and almost constant delirium.

"The first day of my convalescence, hardly able to speak, I announced to my mother that I wanted to go to Paris to become a great painter. The poor woman was beside herself. The decision seemed so insane to her that she thought I'd relapsed. But my pulse was steady, and I explained with great clarity a project that seemed well fixed in my mind. The doctor, who had a sense of taste and had seen the drawing on my bedside table during my illness, thought he saw clear signs of genuine talent in the rough sketch. He reassured my mother and urged her not to interfere. The good woman agreed to everything. Concerned about my youth, however, she begged me to wait two more years. The doctor tempered my impatience by promising to direct my studies and furnish me with good models. Finally, the two years over, we came to Paris. My mother moved me into a

little room next door to one of her relatives who, by a happy coincidence, turned out to be the friend of _____. He welcomed me in his atelier without letting me pay. Trusting then that providence was guiding my first steps, my mother went back to her village. She wanted to bring me to see Madame d'Hespel, whose kindness she knew. I refused. When I became a great painter, I told her, I would go on my own to ask Mademoiselle de la Thieullaye to look at my work. Until then, she mustn't hear a word about me. I don't want to be sheltered; I want to be acclaimed. It was of course very pompous, very crazy. You're going to laugh out of pity. And yet, here I am, after seven years of silence and work. And tomorrow, if you look with pleasure on one of the canvases I've breathed into life, if you feel some sympathy for the creations of my soul and my hand, I'll feel like the first, the greatest man on earth. If not, if you find me unworthy of praise, if your heart remains untouched by my faltering efforts, I'll suffer enormously, I admit, but I'll by no means give up. I'll close myself up again—one year, ten years if necessary—and, when that's over, you'll see me again, and I'll speak to you in the same way. I'll say as I've said today: Come! Come join the poor inspired or deluded artist. Pronounce his verdict. Give him his crown of laurel or of thorns, because his genius or his madness, his glory or his misery come from you. You're the one accountable to God!"

Guermann had become more intense as he spoke, and his passionate words carried the compelling ring of truth. Nelida was deeply moved. For the first time, she heard poetic passion expressed neither in the language of love nor religion, but in a form inspired by both. In the most unexpected way and without there being any cause for her to be offended by it, she suddenly discovered that for seven years she had reigned over a heart full of courage—a noble spirit, perhaps even a great genius! She saw herself as the mediator of a destiny, in charge of a soul, taking on, abruptly, the character of Dante's Beatrice—the dream of every woman capable of envisioning the ideal! And it should also be con-

fessed that she felt deep in her soul the birth of immense pride. That emotion was perhaps not as Christian as might have been hoped from Father Aimery's docile student. But which woman, however humble, who turns her back in good conscience to selfless adoration, won't secretly linger at the altar, mute and veiled, as she breathes in the pure incense of sacrifice?

"Will you show us this portrait tomorrow?" Nelida asked after a short silence, continuing to walk.

A soft breeze over their heads played with the hanging loops of ivy and creeper, brushing them against the iron trellis and creating a soft, plaintive, sustained rustling.

"I'll show it to you when you instruct me to," Guermann answered. "But we have to be alone. Never, except for the good doctor who found it accidentally, has anyone seen this drawing. No one will ever see it. That would be a sacrilege. That portrait is my only religion, my only idol. My whole past, my whole future lie in those few lines drawn by a child under the direction of an invisible power. All my ambition, all my self-worth," he added after a slight hesitation, "are in a name I no longer dare say—"

"Nelida!" called Madame d'Hespel at that moment from the other end of the arbor. The two young people stopped as if struck by electricity.

"Nelida," Guermann repeated softly to himself. "I wasn't the one who said it," he added, lifting his eyes to the young woman.

She quickened her step and began running to join her aunt. They wanted her to try on a riding habit. She left in a hurry, not turning to tell Guermann, still several steps behind, good-bye.

The artist immediately took leave of Madame d'Hespel. The vicomtesse again promised to come to his atelier the following day.

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VIII

An hour later, the vicomtesse summoned Nelida.

"My child," she said, "prepare to go out. I've called for my horses, and we're going to surprise Guermann at his atelier. When I promised him to go there tomorrow, I forgot the errands I had to run. Day after tomorrow I have the musical matinee with Madame de Blonay, and Thursday, the reading on Charles V. Our visit would have to be postponed indefinitely, and I'd regret that. I'm very interested in this young man—very much indeed—and want to write his mother my thoughts about his paintings. It's more polite to go right now."

Nelida didn't object. She climbed in the coach with her aunt and, ten minutes later, they both entered the narrow pathway of Rue de Beaune and climbed a dimly lit stairway, preceded by a lackey who was very surprised to be leading his mistress through such a place.

"Phew!" the vicomtesse said, pausing on every floor and laughing heartily, "and that's number three! And that's four! Just a little more fortitude and we're in heaven!"

Nelida wasn't laughing. The wretched house's appearance, its dirty and tortuous stairway upset her deeply. What a contrast to the carpeted steps of the Hespel estate and all the sumptuous residences where her friends lived! Like all women of her position, elevated in and by society, Mademoiselle de la Thieullaye knew, in theory, that poverty existed. She had heard about it from the pulpit. She had seen it from a distance in the streets and had always given generous offerings at collection time. But never had so brutal

a reality hit her in the face. Never had she been prompted to reflect on the inexorable law of work and misery that weighs so heavily on the masses. She had no concept of the bitter state of those whose superior talents, lofty instincts, refined behavior didn't spare them from need and who, unable to give themselves to the noble ambitions that attracted them, are forced to bend their backs to a coarse labor that barely assures their existence. She thought these things for the first time as she entered Guermann's building, home of the man who adored her, the man to whom her heart secretly awarded the palm leaf of genius. She remembered his words "I've had to become an artist, yet remain a craftsman." Tears were welling in her eyes when the maid, who had arrived at the seventh-floor landing, energetically rang at a small, low door to which Guermann Regnier's visiting card was nailed. Several minutes went by before anyone came. The frustrated valet was about to ring again when they heard the sound of an inside door. Light steps approached and a woman's voice said a little hesitantly, "Is that you, Virginia?"

"It's me," answered Madame d'Hespel, disguising her voice and congratulating herself on her cleverness. Indeed, the key turned in the lock. Entering abruptly, the vicomtesse found herself in a nearly dark room face to face with a bare-armed, ravishing creature whose loose hair spilled over her shoulders. The girl uttered a cry and fled through a door facing the entry. Madame d'Hespel heard her say:

"Guermann, some ladies are here! Where can I hide?"

"She must be a model," said the vicomtesse to Nelida, surprised by so strange a sight. "You have that with painters. Luckily, it's a woman; we can go on in."

Guermann appeared at the atelier door. He was dressed in a loose-fitting shirt and grey pants. He held his palette and his maulstick.

"My God, madame—" he cried, seeing the vicomtesse, "you've found me in total confusion. Forgive me for welcoming you in such an outfit, but I wasn't expecting—"

"*Tsk, tsk*; it doesn't matter a bit, my child," the vicomtesse interrupted, boldly walking into the atelier. "Impatience to see all your beautiful things made us push forward the day and hour. Perhaps we're inconveniencing you," she added, glancing around inquisitively. "You were working with a model?"

The young woman who opened the door had gone to huddle behind the heater after hastily grabbing part of a purple curtain and covering her shoulders with it; she was like a bright red mannequin, blushing to her hairline. Arms crossing her breasts, eyes downcast, holding her breath, she was in visible torment and distress.

"The young lady has been kind enough to model her hair for me," Guermann said solemnly. "I know of none more beautiful. She was willing to agree—"

The young girl raised her eyes—two eyes sparkling with youth—and looked at the artist in a way that said "Thank you."

"I'm not rich enough to pay my models," Guermann continued in an undertone, leading the vicomtesse and Nelida to the easel holding his composition based on the ballad of Goethe.

"What an odd subject!" Madame d'Hespel said. "One should, I suppose, know German to understand it?"

"What determined my choice of subject," Guermann said, speaking to Nelida, who was deeply touched by the painting, which possessed a purity of line and harmony of tone that would strike the most untutored gaze, "was childishness and arrogance. Childishness because in the first flush of youth I developed a wild, absurd, ridiculous liking for water lilies, and this scene gave me the chance to use them."

Nelida approached the canvas as if to examine a detail but in fact to hide a bright flush.

"Arrogance because I knew Goethe considered the subject impossible and had severely criticized another painter for choosing it. You couldn't believe, mademoiselle, what fierce churnings are stirred in an artist's heart by the word

impossible—like a battle cry, like a call to audacity. For six months, Goethe's word echoed constantly in my ears. I found release only after I, so to say, finally accepted the challenge. I began the painting you see here. It must obviously appear to your eyes like a pathetic victory over the great poet's opinion, but in the first days of my childish infatuation, it seemed such a masterpiece that I constantly imagined Goethe's shadow looming before me, coming from the grave expressly to offer congratulations and admit defeat."

While Guermann spoke, the vicomtesse's glance wandered over all the atelier's crannies and corners. But Nelida—curious, amazed, perceiving art's mysteries for the first time through these words—Nelida, for whom the fresh horizons of poetry suddenly began to open—listened hungrily to the artist's speech, never thinking of interrupting him.

"Do you know, Nelida, that this Naiad looks like you?" Madame d'Hespel said finally.

"Here's the picture of my mother," Guermann said, distracting the vicomtesse's attention. Passing by Nelida to get to his easel, piercing her heart like a flaming sword, he added: "I can't live for you. But nothing and no one can keep me from living through you."

"Ah, this time—there's something marvelous!" exclaimed the vicomtesse. "This is striking, this speaks to me. It's as if she were here, good Madame Regnier, with her fine Sunday shawl and her amethyst brooch. There are those fluffed-up little curls she never wanted to do without, no matter what I might say or do. Oh, my goodness—it makes me want to laugh, it's so like her. And her old armchair with the leaf designs—nothing's missing. One might say she's about to say hello. Frankly, my friend, I like this one better than your Naiad, which is none too natural. She has a distracting resemblance to Nelida, but, still, I've never seen a woman like that."

"I doubt indeed, madame," replied Guermann, beginning to lose patience, "that you've seen many Naiads."

"Ah, well, my child," Madame d'Hespel continued, ignoring his response, "we don't want to inconvenience you any longer. We'll come back. The young lady must finish posing," she added, drawing closer and examining the girl with interest. Having regained her composure and apparently not bothered by an inspection she knew wouldn't be unfavorable, the girl looked at Madame d'Hespel in high-spirited mischief. A charming smile parted her crimson lips, tempting as a cherry split open by the sun.

"You'll come see us soon, won't you?" the vicomtesse went on, turning to Guermann, who was escorting her out. "I must tell you that I, too, am a painter. More precisely, I'm very much a colorist. An explosion of color simply transports me—perhaps, I must confess, a bit at the expense of a perfectly clean line."

Guermann smiled and promised to come the following day. He accompanied the vicomtesse all the way to the base of the seven flights of stairs, and, holding Nelida's hand to help her into the carriage, said, "I return to the temple. The spirit has come to it. My work is blessed, my destiny consecrated."

Nelida returned home racked by agitation. Since the ball at her aunt's, since that overwhelming waltz in which her youthful reserve, slipping away from her as her senses became confused, had been gathered up by a man who was to become her husband, she thought she felt passionate and eternal love for him. All she had felt at Timoleon's approach—the slight embarrassment of sensitive modesty, a naive gratitude for his attention, an indulgent admiration for his superior wit and his personal charm—all these jumbled sensations were so new, so voluptuous, that Nelida didn't doubt that they were the soul-stirring emotions of a woman in love. The charm of Mademoiselle Langin's confidences and her artificial conversation had perpetuated her error. She also dreamed rapturously of the poetic life she would lead. She imagined the antiquated château in

Brittany that Timoleon described so well—the expanses of pink heather, the druidic stones, the horse races across the rugged terrain, along the echoing cliffs, escorted by a noble knight who addressed her in the sweet and solemn language of sworn allegiance and sanctified love. Feeling already bound by ties of mutual affinity, she was charmed, confident, calm, not fathoming there could exist on earth a more ardent tenderness or a greater happiness than hers.

And all of a sudden another idea rises up in her soul, another preoccupation absorbs her, another destiny interests her. The painter's atelier, not the great lord's château, beckons and captures her imagination. Guermann's image, not Timoleon's, is at her side!

Passion, passion—that pitiless force that carries us away, then crushes us! Fiery breath pushing us through whirlwinds of joy and sorrow that others never know! Love, Desire, Ambition, Genius—whatever your name: endlessly ravenous eagle or vulture! Blessed are they whom you spurn as your prey! Blessed the mild ones whom you never visited! Blessed, most of all, the woman who has never heard the rustling of your dreadful wings above her head!

IX

Almost at sunset the next day, Guermann entered the small drawing room Madame d'Hespel called her atelier. Lighted from above, its walls swathed in green satin, the room was weighed down with so-called *objets d'art* and an array of tools, as elegant as they were useless, which served the vicomtesse in the exercise of her painterly craft.

"You've caught me *in flagrante delicto*," she exclaimed on seeing Guermann, "and in my artist's outfit."

It was an oblique way to call attention to her bare, still-well-preserved arms, the tapered waist of her form-fitting, brown cashmere dress, and her black lace apron that flipped up coquettishly like those worn by theater attendants.

"You're going to look down on my work," she continued, "because you *history* painters, as they say, scoff at genre painting. I started an oil three years ago, but frankly, it smelled too much, it was too dirty. I prefer watercolors, and I think I've gone about as far as one can go with indoor arrangements. Still, perfection on a small scale is better than mediocrity on a large one, don't you agree?"

"Without any doubt whatsoever," Guermann said, smiling imperceptibly.

"Come on now, be sincere," responded the vicomtesse. "I can handle it. I don't have the least trace of vanity. Here, first of all, is *Family Dog*. It's entirely my own creation. The dog prefers the little boy you see here, and the other children are jealous. Don't you think I've expressed my ideas? That little girl's look, especially! Oh, it's nothing much," she went on, slightly vexed at Guermann's silence. "One

shouldn't expect an epic event; it's just innocent, simple. Then here's *The Sailor's Return*. I did this one at Dieppe. An English painter retouched the wave in the foreground, which he found too blue. But he assured me the others were excellent, even though that was my debut."

"Allow me to say to you that you are an adorable woman," Guermann said, kissing her hand.

The vicomtesse was touched.

"Oh," she said with feeling, "I know I'm a true artist. I've suffered persecution for my work. My friends found it dreadful that I should give myself over so fully to my taste for painting. They claimed it would lead to improper relationships. They even threatened to stop coming to my salon! But I braved the storm and managed to arrange everything. I have a special day for artists: Mondays. I give them dinner. In the evening we sing, we sketch in my albums. Sometimes we play charades. It's extremely interesting, and we have a wonderful time. This one—" she continued, not in the least suspecting she was at this moment being more presumptuous than any of her friends, "is my gardener's daughter bringing me roses in a basket. Would you please note that little green caterpillar—is that not nature? But you must help me finish the goat I've added to fill this empty space, to the left. I've never been able to get its fur quite glossy enough."

With the greatest of ease, Guermann sat and took the vicomtesse's brush.

"Come see," Madame d'Hespel said to Nelida, who came in after several minutes, "how nice this wonderful man is. Here he is, working miracles on my painting. It's amazing how that goat stands out now. I have to admit, I failed miserably there."

"Have a little patience, Madame la Vicomtesse," Guermann said, not stopping his work. "You have such a fine brush stroke that it's hard for me not to ruin it. I'll be here for an hour at least. Would you allow me to work over there?"

"Fine, fine, my child; you enthrall me. Unfortunately, I have to go out, but Nelida will keep you company, and I'll join you when I return. You'll dine with us."

Always having much to do, the vicomtesse went out in high spirits, leaving, in the best of faith, Nelida and the artist in dangerous intimacy.

"Do you really find these compositions attractive?" Nelida asked, sitting on a large, velvet armchair where the vicomtesse had posed her dog.

"I find your aunt the best-intentioned person in the world," Guermann answered, "and whatever brings me close to you seems like the work of the gods. We artists are outcasts," he went on, now seeming to speak to himself in an inner flood of thought that Madame d'Hespel's insensitive babble had opened up. "I know that to be the case. In its lofty disdain, society treats us like dirty artisans who deal in lumps of marble or a few yards of color-smeared canvas. It's convinced that our ultimate ambition should be to praise grand, overindulged lords and divert bored, wrought-up women. It hasn't escaped my attention that once they've haggled with us and paid us the labor of our hands (because who among those cold-blooded people could imagine the soul's inspiration being part of it?), once they've tossed us our salary, they then turn their backs and walk away, as if we were nothing more than wandering beggars."

"You're being unfair," Nelida said, seeing the artist's hands clench and his face flush with anger.

"Oh, Nelida!" he said, standing up and throwing Madame d'Hespel's paintbrush across the room. "They despise us, care nothing about us! But what difference does that make, in the end? Art is great. Art is holy. Art is immortal. The artist is the first, the noblest of men. He feels God's invisible presence in creation with greater intensity than anyone else and expresses it with more power. Here on earth he performs the duties of a defiled but noble priesthood. In the harmony of the cosmos, Divinity smiles on no one else; only he holds the secret of infinite beauty. The

ecstasy of his raptured soul is the purest incense the Creator will ever see rise from earth to heaven."

Guermann strode across the room. Her eyes following him, Nelida was alarmed by the violence of his temper but was overpowered, somehow fascinated, by his passionate words, which she only half understood. The artist continued talking for a long time. He had a kind of nervous irritability and energetic anger that occasionally rose to the level of eloquence. Quick to grasp whatever flattered the self-worth that formed the base of his nature, he had over the past several years passionately embraced the theories of a well-known school that preached to the youth. In him, Saint-Simonian opinions had found a fervent disciple. Whatever time was left after practicing his art was devoted to following the new gospel's principles and grounding himself in its doctrines. The glorification of beauty and intelligence, the call to the unknown woman that every man secretly hopes to meet, the *redeeming of the flesh*, to use a sacred term, all were clearly designed to seduce young men in the first throes of ambition and intellectual exhilaration. Especially Guermann, whose thought hadn't been strengthened by solid study, whose leaps weren't steadied by any moderating influence, who threw himself drunkenly into torrents of ideas both true and false, logical and irrational, erupting at that time throughout society. He read, he listened, he accepted everything at face value, haphazardly, indiscriminately, without control, because it all flattered his chaotic predilections. And soon he came not to a serious and sincere conviction but to a harsh and unhealthy sentiment about social inequality and prejudices aligned against him.

Noticing a combination of fear and surprise in Nelida that flattered his vanity, Guermann often returned to his chosen improvisational theme in the frequent talks that followed, unfolding the entirety of Saint-Simonian doctrine (while hiding what might challenge her beliefs and especially her uncorrupted instincts), creating a disturbance

in her mind that increased the turmoil growing daily in her heart.

Incapable of enjoying anything for long, Madame d'Hespel had abandoned her paintbrushes in order to set up a charitable cause. No longer concerned with Guermann, nor even with Nelida, whose position as the betrothed forbade evening gatherings and visits, she was gone all day. So the two young people, through an odd coincidence, found themselves delivered to one another, seeing each other in constant intimacy with total freedom and no one around to find fault in their behavior. Guermann took enormous pleasure in initiating Nelida into the mysteries of art and the foundations of social theory. The young woman's finely attuned sensibility made her as gifted in apprehending formal beauty as in perceiving abstract principles. A new world unfolded before her eyes, a temple whose ivory doors magically opened wide at the word of the young Levite. She wasn't defiant—why should she be? Guermann spoke, applying to his art the mystical language of believers. Beauty, according to him, was God; art was its religion; the artist, its priest; the beloved was the radiant Beatrice, pure and unblemished, who guides the poet through celestial spheres.

His deep respect for Nelida during these open discussions, the seemingly opposing interests stimulating them, blinded the young woman and increasingly reassured her about a sentiment she had watched spring to life with horror and about which she no longer cared to be aware. She didn't sense Guermann's invasive advance into her heart. Seeing him every day, she didn't have time to notice how necessary his presence had become to her. Tacitly accepting the role of Beatrice in which he had cast her, she didn't fathom that she, in a sense, was committing and joining her destiny to that of a man whose blood ties and social connections didn't come close to her own. Little by little she forgot Timoleon, thinking only that she was waiting for him. Besides, the conversations with Guermann were vastly different,

having entered a level of ideas so far beyond what she had known that no comparison could be made in her mind, no connection was possible. She didn't even know if Guermann knew about her approaching marriage. Their talk never touched on everyday life. Excited and inspired, the young artist had swept her away with him to an ideal realm and seemed afraid of returning to earth. But the day wasn't far when they both would come hurtling back down.

Alone with Nelida one day in Madame d'Hespel's atelier, Guermann was showing her a series of drawings based on Vatican poetry. Charmed and attentive, the young woman listened to descriptions of the full, fertile, healthy, and glorious existence of Raphael Sanzio, this *son of an angel and a Muse,* as he was so aptly called. She was astonished over the great artist's love for this Fornarina, a woman without talent or virtue, an uncultivated girl of the people, and didn't notice that Guermann seemed a little surprised. He held back, however, from telling her all of his thoughts on the matter. He didn't tell her, especially, that there might be something similar in his own life, since it's impossible for there not to be always a touch of duplicity in the purest relationships. Man is the strong and lusty one who desires and boldly seizes every pleasure from whatever quagmire; woman is the open-eyed, blind beauty who moves through the world's realities as she crosses the folds of her veil over her breasts. While they were there, she inclining to these noble fantasies, these quasi-divine creations by the master *par excellence*, he, seated beside her, slowly turning the pages, Nelida was handed a letter forwarded by her aunt. Recognizing the handwriting, she turned pale. How odd is fate! And yet it was her fiancé who was writing—the husband of her own choosing! She broke the seal with a trembling hand and, while Guermann studied her face for visible signs of emotion, she silently read:

> *Your aunt has agreed to allow me, mademoiselle, to announce to you without her presence as mediator some*

news that makes me the most fortunate of men: The absurd court proceedings that threatened to keep me here have just been completed through a settlement. I leave day after tomorrow. I rush to fall at your feet and ask you to hasten the day when you agree to surrender your name for mine, your home for mine, and when I'll be allowed to speak before heaven of the tender, respectful, and devoted love that binds me to you.

Nelida didn't finish. Her eyelids closed; her hand dropped the letter to the floor. Guermann picked it up, devouring it in a single look. Beside himself, carried away with passion, with despair, he grabbed the half-conscious young woman and kissed her passionately. She tried to break free. He held her:

"You love me!" he cried. "I know it, I see it, I feel it in the depths of my heart—you love me. Those lunatics! They're tearing you away from me—from the only man who can understand you! You poor victim! All right, then—go. Give in to their brutal law. Give your husband, give the world your days and your nights, your captive will, your icy word. You won't know how to give them your soul. It's mine! I reign supreme there, in spite of them, even in spite of you. I won't see you again, but you belong to me forever. Goodbye, Nelida. Good-bye!"

And he disappeared, leaving the young woman devastated, motionless, thunderstruck.

"Guermann! Guermann!" she finally called out, coming back to her senses.

And his name, as she said it, showed her the mystery of her own heart. No longer any doubt: She loved him. She loved him passionately, profoundly. He knew it. He had said so. She was his. The kiss she still felt on her lips left its indelible mark, the seal of a union no one could ever break. In utter innocence she believed it and felt it was true. From that moment, Guermann's rights over her seemed absolute. She couldn't imagine giving herself to another without a sense of violation.

She spent the rest of that day and part of the night in an agitation and turmoil close to madness. Then, as happens with the crises of youth, excessive emotion gave way to depression. Nature reassumed its priorities. Nelida gave in and rested several hours. When she woke up her head was refreshed, her ideas lucid. She felt like a captive watching her chains fall to her feet. She was determined, whatever the cost, to withdraw her promise and break off her marriage—in spite of prayers, reproaches, explosive scenes, or scandal.

"Am I not free?" she asked herself. "Who could force me into a marriage that now goes against honor? I love a man worthy of all my love, a man not my equal in the world's eyes but my superior before God. His soul is nobler, his virtue greater, his intelligence more vast than mine. I love a man of genius, I'm loved by him—should I hesitate a second? Oh, Jesus! Oh, Mary's son!" she cried, falling to her knees, her face in her hands, "I'll know how to follow your divine example. You didn't at all seek out the great names of earth as your friends and disciples. You've cherished only the poor and oppressed. You've taught us that in your eyes there's no other rank or privilege than a purer conscience and more abundant charity. Besides, what glory and bliss can compare to giving everything, sacrificing everything, trampling everything underfoot for a great heart struggling against the trials and hardships of unjust fortune!"

And then the young enthusiast imagined her battles with family and society in a heroic light. She saw herself condemned by opinion, shunned by friends, retreating into solitude with her husband, living only for him, encouraging him with a word, rewarding him with a smile, pleading, working by his side. Unwittingly, she succumbed to the seduction most irresistible to great souls: that of misfortune. When the tempter addresses the noble daughters of Eve, it isn't curiosity, pride, or pleasure he stirs up and flatters with deceptive promises. He doesn't show them earthly kingdoms, knowledge of the underworld, or heavenly thrones; rather, far away, under a dark horizon: a desolate site of exile where

an unfortunate and perhaps guilty soul, sad and alone, goes moaning. And the daughter of Eve, unwisely generous, immediately leaves the perfumed groves and angelic conversations. Without effort or regret, she leaves earthly paradise behind. She goes to find the man whose lip damns existence and whose heart holds no joy so that she might suffer beside him, might pity or console him.

Between an energetic decision and its execution lies a world of uncertainty and instability. When Nelida, calm, strong, determined to brave it all, put on her hat and shawl on the pretext of going as she often did to visit Mademoiselle Langin, whose home was next to hers, she was trembling from head to toe. What seemed a heroic act a few moments earlier now appeared like a shameful mistake. This furtive trip—to go where? To find a young man at his home, tell him—she, the proud, reserved Nelida—that she loved him and wanted to be his wife—. Enough there to rattle the most headlong audacity. After a half-hour of painful inertia, she mechanically unfastened her hat and decided to wait a little longer, to put off her trip until tomorrow, when the sound of a carriage entering the courtyard made her jump. Thinking it was perhaps Monsieur de Kervaens, unable to bear the idea of facing him, she raced to bolt the door connecting with Madame d'Hespel's quarters and rushed to a little service stairway that exited under the archway. Her face hidden by a heavy veil, her shape disguised by the folds of her long shawl, she crossed the threshold of the still-open porte cochère and walked quickly along the street's slick, muddy sidewalk. Not raising her eyes or looking around, she crossed the square and entered Tuileries Gardens. The palace clock chimed five times. A dull haze shrouded the garden. The chestnut trees stretched out their rough, black branches. From time to time a gloomy statue's harsh silhouette sliced the steamy air, which was tinged red with rays from the dying sun. The pale and trembling woman slipped phantomlike through the damp fog under the bare, unmoving trees. The blood boiling in her veins protected her from

the fog's chill that seeped into her silken shawl. Her distracted state of mind made objects appear vaguely fantastic. Following impulse rather than conscious will, she arrived at the narrow pathway of Rue de Beaune. She plunged on. Afraid of having to make an explanation to the concierge, she climbed the stairs quickly. But soon, in a swift reversal known only to those who have been passion's playthings, she stopped. The impulse propelling her wavered again. A horrifying flash of reason struck. Immediately renouncing her plan, she grabbed the banister, clinging to it. She had already put her foot on the step leading back down when she heard footsteps on the floor just below. Imagining in her panic that she would find herself face to face with someone who had followed her—Monsieur de Kervaens perhaps—she was seized by terror. She continued her frantic ascent, climbing two more flights. Heaving her weight against a door she thought she recognized, she pulled the bell cord violently.

"Whom do you want, madame?" asked a sweet, familiar voice.

"The atelier of Monsieur Regnier," Nelida said.

"You've missed it by one floor," answered the young woman who opened and whose rich, black hair and rosy skin Nelida perceived in the sunset glow with a vague sense of dread. "The atelier is upstairs, but we live here," she added, "and if you want to see Monsieur Regnier, he should be here soon, since we have dinner at five o'clock."

Not waiting for an answer, the girl ushered Nelida into a little bedroom.

"Ah, it's you, mademoiselle," she exclaimed, removing her work from a Moroccan leather chair that she pushed forward. "Excuse me for not recognizing you right away. But—you're not sick, are you?" she continued, seeing that Nelida, breathless, was unable to utter a word. "Have you lost your breath climbing the stairs too quickly? Would you like a little orange-flower water?"

Nelida gestured that she didn't need anything, but the kind creature didn't stop trying to help, taking a lump of

sugar from the drawer and dissolving it in a tall, red-crystal glass that, with its matching carafe, made up the modest lodging's principal decoration.

"If you like, I'll unhook your clothes; you don't seem to be breathing easily," she said.

Distraught, Nelida looked at her for a long time.

"You live with Monsieur Guermann?" she asked finally.

"Yes, mademoiselle.

"Are you related?"

The young woman smiled.

"Related? Yes, in a way. We're a couple."

"I didn't know he was married," Nelida said in a fading voice.

"Married? Let's be clear," said the working-class girl, offering Nelida the glass of sweetened water. "It's easy for me to use such terms with you. Neither the mayor nor the priest had us promise anything. But we don't love each other any less because of that. I take care of our home. I'm completely faithful and not at all jealous, for example. I don't nag him about his models, though many times—but with artists one mustn't examine such things too closely. Are you feeling better?" she asked gently after Nelida had mechanically swallowed the entire glass of water.

"I'm fine," answered Nelida in a voice so hollow and lifeless that it seemed to come from the chest of a dying person. "I'll come back. It was about a portrait."

She stood up in agitation and walked out, despite the young woman's protests, racing down the stairs so quickly that the alarmed girl called out, "Watch out! Watch out! You're going to hit something. It's hard to see down there. There's a broken step at the turn!"

At the final flight of stairs, Nelida heard, distinctly this time, steps coming up. Terrified, she pressed herself into a doorway shadowed in complete darkness, huddling there, holding her breath. A man's shape, wrapped in a coat, passed by and brushed her lightly. She stood still, deathly afraid, then jumped when the bell on the upper

floor rang out. Not at all comprehending what she was doing, she again went down, crossed the pathway, rushed into the street, turned at the quay, then began running in the opposite direction of Royal Bridge. Soon, however, with the logic innate to some who are deranged, she stopped, telling herself it was foolish to draw the attention of passersby. Alone in the street at such an hour, she should walk calmly and not provoke a violent reaction. Reasoning in this strange way, she continued along the parapet, casting disturbing looks on the dark water, brightened at long intervals by the reflection of lamplights. The fog grew steadily deeper.

She came to one of the embankments of the Seine. After looking around to see if she was followed, she began laughing convulsively and took the path to the river. Suddenly, a muscular arm powerfully seized her own, and a man's voice said firmly:

"Stop, madame. What you're about to do is wrong."

Nelida turned to see a man beside her, dressed in a laborer's shirt.

"Excuse me, madame, for stopping you," he said. "I've been following you a little while and guessed by your dress, your manner, that you weren't simply near the river alone without some unfortunate plan. Let me take you home, madame. Let me put you in a carriage. You mustn't do a bad thing."

Still talking to her, the worker led Nelida—docile as a child under the influence of this sturdy arm that would not let her go—back up the bank.

"Thank you," she said, finally.

She couldn't say more. Tears flooded her eyes.

"Cry, madame, cry," the worker said. "That helps the pain. I know. I know all about pain. And if it weren't for my poor family, maybe I would have done what you were about to do a long time ago. Please forgive me," he went on after a silence, "for walking with you like this, but I don't dare leave you alone. Besides, there's so much fog, and you're so

hidden under your veil that no one can recognize you. And we'll find a cab soon."

They walked briskly to the place where carriages were rented. None was available. The worker invoked a hearty curse on the absent cabmen.

"Do you live far from here?"

Nelida hesitated to answer.

"Don't think it's curiosity, madame, making me ask. I just wanted to know if you have far to walk, because your poor legs aren't very strong right now, and you wouldn't like to be carried."

"I live on Rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré," Nelida said, ashamed of her distrust. "I can easily walk that far. But what about you? That's surely out of your way, isn't it?"

"No, madame. My day's over, and the supper waiting for me won't get cold," the worker said with an odd smile. "Bread and cheese is always good, always tempting, after ten hours of work."

He was silent.

Nelida leaned on his arm with an instinctive sense of respect. She was returning, strongly and roughly, to her senses.

"What can I do for you?" she finally said, approaching the Hespel mansion. She had her hand on her purse, but she didn't dare offer it to the man.

"Promise me something," he answered in complete simplicity. "Put your hand—as pretty a hand as anyone ever saw—in mine and, now, swear to me—very seriously, before God—never to do that again."

"I swear it," Nelida said, deeply moved, holding his hand tightly.

"Good-bye, madame," the worker said a few steps from the door. "They mustn't see me with you."

"Give me your name and address," Nelida said.

"My name is François, and I live at Number 8, Rue Saint-Étienne-du-Mont," he said.

Nelida let go of his arm. He stood at the same spot, following her with his eyes until he saw the large door of the porte cochère close behind her.

Without being recognized, the young woman slipped by the lodge of the concierge, who took her for one of the serving women, not imagining that Mademoiselle de la Thieullaye would come back like that—on foot, alone, at such an hour. The chambermaid, seeing her pale and shattered look, was horrified and wanted to send for the doctor and the vicomtesse, who was dining in town. Nelida forbade it, giving a plausible explanation for her disarray, and went to bed, saying that she felt perfectly normal. In the course of the evening, the chambermaid entered on tiptoe several times. Hearing no sound and seeing Nelida resting quietly, she assumed her to be sleeping deeply and deemed it unnecessary to bother Madame d'Hespel. The next morning, when they came to Mademoiselle de la Thieullaye's room at the usual hour, they found her immobile, her eyes vacant, her hands tightly clenched. They thought she was dead. The doctor, called in haste, diagnosed a brain hemorrhage and declared the condition so serious that he would not accept full responsibility for treatment. Three of his most highly regarded colleagues were called into consultation. Their diagnosis was unanimous: an extremely violent brain fever. For two days they used the most vigorous procedures with no result except a slight movement of the lips and eyelids. Madame d'Hespel and Monsieur de Kervaens, the latter having arrived in Paris the very day Nelida fell ill, took turns keeping watch at her bedside. Both were crying as though she were already dead when, on the third day, coming close to the bed, Timoleon thought he noticed a slightly less ashen pallor to her cheeks. He took her hand. What joy! For the first time in forty-eight hours it wasn't icy. He leaned over her and thought he was dreaming when he saw the young woman's eyes appear to follow his movements and try to recognize him. He uttered a cry of joy. She heard it; her lips opened as if to answer. "Nelida!" he exclaimed. "Do you understand me, do you recognize me?" She squeezed his hand. Then, wearied by the effort, she closed her eyes and slipped back into sleep. The doctor came. He found a marked improvement in her pulse and a healthy

moisture to her skin. To boost this first symptom of response, he ordered a redoubling of cleansing procedures. Twice more that same day Nelida gave signs of consciousness, giving hope to the thought that she might return to life. In effect, life did return to the young woman's heart and mind, and the first image she glimpsed was that of a friend keeping watch at her side. The first sound in her ear was a word of love. She thought she was coming out of a horrifying nightmare. A murky apparition, as if from a tarnished mirror, grimaced hideously at her. She had been played the fool in a highly remarkable game of deceit. Her soul wasn't fashioned for hate. Revenge had no place in her heart. But contempt, or so she believed, had killed her love with a single blow. She thought of herself as a poor little sick girl fortunately cured of an attack of delirium. Eager to leave Paris, she shortened her convalescence through an act of will, and she herself set the date for the wedding ceremony.

On December third, a huge crowd filled Église de Saint-Philippe. A long line of carriages blocked access to the church square. The most elegant society was gathered in that holy place. Filled with envy, friends of Monsieur de Kervaens were present to witness his joy. Under her pink satin hat, Hortense Langin tried vainly to maintain her composure and brave the snide looks directed her way, since her plans regarding Timoleon were well known.

As the noon bells rang out, the sacristy doors opened. "Here she is!" murmured everyone. "Look how beautiful she is! How pale!"

Still extremely weak, Nelida stepped firmly forward and gave her arm to an uncle of Monsieur de Kervaens in formal military dress. She looked calm, deep, majestic, and sad. She seemed like the regal victim of some ancient fate, a young Niobe whose breast already senses her collapsing dreams.

Father Aimery gave an obsequious speech exalting the inherited chivalric virtues of the groom's family and the

Christian graces passed from mother to daughter that adorned the bride's house.

"Aren't they happy, those rich people!" a working woman said to her companion, watching Nelida climb into her carriage.

"Not as much as we often think," answered a man in a laborer's shirt.

Nelida turned quickly and looked in the direction of the voice she thought she recognized. That same evening, honest François in his mansard apartment on Rue Saint-Étienne-du-Mont received by courier a two-hundred-franc check with these words hastily penned in a fine hand:

> *A person you saved from a shameful mistake asks you not to refuse this small sum to help you and your family. Tell your mother to bless the new bride. Advise your children to pray for her.*

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Part Three

XI

Kervaens château was on the summit of a plateau that offered a limitless view of the horizon. On one side, the plateau sloped imperceptibly several miles to the harbors of Dol. On the other, it dropped off sharply to the sea, where, during storms, furious waves pounded the cliffs.

This ancient residence of the lords of Kervaens had an imposing air that came more from the solidity and severity of the grey-hued granite and black schist of its construction than for any beauty of form. Whether its huge mass was the result of successive constructions, or whether it was part of a transitional period when Gothic and Romanesque elements were still comingled and seemingly inseparable in the artist's mind, there was no unity of detail to the massive whole. It was a thick square flanked at intervals by circular towers or donjons, crowned by parapets, and pierced by symmetrical windows, some of which still had slightly lower curves while others opened wide into sturdy ogive arches. Wide, dry moats, where deer and roe passed, surrounded the main courtyard. The atrium was planted with ancient yew trees that grew, in a setting particularly favorable to them, to enormous size. The fixed and serious demeanor of these trees, lined symmetrically in two rows like an honor guard, proudly separated the château from the rest of the countryside and seemed to command the respect of anyone

approaching the feudal domain. The outer wall was secured by an iron gate bearing the Kervaens' coat of arms and leading to a long, straight avenue by an ancient Roman road through fields of black wheat, on to the Dol road.

On another side of the château was an oak forest split by a deep ravine, near which lay several huge rocks, believed to have been used by the druidic cult. The ensemble created well-arranged panoramas of sandy pathways and little houses thrusting themselves artfully across the grassy slopes, shaping a park of exceptional beauty and breathtaking proportions. Timoleon had spent huge sums to restore his ancestral residence to some of its former splendor. Pride in his name firmly gripped his heart. His one serious interest, the single desire remaining in the wake of a youth surfeited with pleasure, was to bring back, to the degree that circumstances permitted, his forefathers' grand manner of life and, with money and skill, to reestablish the near-sovereign dominion they once held over the region. The year following his marriage to Mademoiselle de la Thieullaye was entirely taken up with magnificently furnishing, in the tradition of the country and his family, the vast rooms of Kervaens, whose heavily ornamented archways, massive pillars, curving balustrades, sculpted wood, and towering chimneys with pointed mantles lent themselves marvelously to noble and lavish decoration. Every day brought delivery of restored paintings, rare furniture, trunks filled with Celtic or Roman antiques that Timoleon had tracked down from all directions. He often went to London and Paris, either to prod workers or to take possession himself of some precious historical relic made known to him. An architect and two tapestry-makers oversaw the project, but nothing was done without the master's orders. The most minute detail absorbed him. He was obsessed by his work and, in each part of it, sought whatever perfection might be possible.

For her part, Nelida wasn't idle. Allowed free use of her income by Timoleon, who had a great lord's manner in everything he did, she asked about troubles that needed

taking care of and, with intelligent compassion, drew close to the rough and uncultivated but good and honest people around her. Thus isolated from the world, in this beautiful spot whose proud melancholy suited so well the state of her soul, she spent eighteen cloudless months. Guermann's name had never been mentioned at Kervaens. There, Nelida began a new life upon which her past heartache scarcely threw a shadow. Filled with good works and a variety of outings, the days rolled quickly by. Relationships with workers, improvements offered for her approval, Breton legends and family anecdotes that Timoleon recounted with zestful pleasure filled their evenings. She had no doubt that she and her husband had exactly the same tastes, the same needs. Certain that similar things would always make them happy, she congratulated herself for having escaped, as if by miracle, domination by a fatal passion to find simple and steadfast happiness in so perfectly matched a union.

At the point when the story resumes, Kervaens' aspect had changed. Timoleon, who refused to see anyone until his stables, his hunting teams, and his livery were in perfect order, had just accompanied Nelida into the neighborhood. Letters were sent in all directions to invite his friends to spend a beautiful season in Brittany. The Vicomtesse d'Hespel, Mademoiselle Langin (become Baroness de Sognencourt), and a host of other more or less intimate friends rushed to join them. The château and the park perpetually rang out with fanfares, serenades. All one saw were noisy groups gathering to hunt, fish, and eat meals carried at great expense to picturesque locations. A comedy was about to be presented. Timoleon was ecstatic. Nelida tried to share his joy, but soon she felt out of place among these endless diversions. She began to miss her solitude. Little by little, without calling attention to it and by using some pretext or other, she excused herself from the so-called rural parties and appeared only when her presence was required. Timoleon didn't notice her absence as much as she might have expected. He professed, moreover, a

respect for individual freedom that was little more than polite indifference. When he kissed his wife's hand, asking if she would be on the hunt or the outing, and she said no, he didn't insist. He left without even asking why she had refused.

At Kervaens as in Paris, beautiful Hortense reigned supreme. Five times a day she changed outfits. In the morning, she walked along wooded paths in a white peignoir rehearsing a role; at lunch, she appeared in the most studiedly casual attire. Later, she squeezed her tiny waist into a riding habit with long streamers and dashed off, whip held high, on a fearless mare, daring the ablest horsemen to take foolhardy risks. In the evening, in full array, bare-shouldered, she waltzed, sang romances and even—without much urging—rather bawdy songs. If she were in moonlight she tossed a Spanish mantilla over her white shoulders and suggested a walk in the park, the honor of offering her one's arm being much coveted. And so, forever the flirt, forever ready for sport, she kept the men in spirited rivalry and keen uncertainty vying for her good graces while heaping ridicule on her husband, making inordinate fun of all the provincials who dared show up at Kervaens—and forever knowing how to maintain a nuance of deferential flattery toward Timoleon that contrasted with the mischievous airs she used to make others obey her—which Monsieur de Kervaens didn't fail to notice.

Often Nelida felt ill at ease during these frivolous conversations where her presence seemed an embarrassment. Often, seeing Timoleon take a lively pleasure in Madame de Sognencourt's impertinent remarks and thinly veiled suggestions, she left the room in tears. Monsieur de Kervaens no longer found, no longer looked for, occasions to talk with his wife alone. He lavished the kindnesses and attentions she had taken as signs of his love for her not only on the baroness but on all the women invited to the parties at Kervaens. Through sharp bouts of depression, Nelida saw a change she couldn't clearly define. No suspicion had yet entered her heart. Beginning, however, to fear that the seriousness of her own mind might be much less to Timoleon's

liking than the baroness's scintillating charms, she found herself envying Hortense's superficiality and taunting wit as gifts that might have made her more appealing in her husband's eyes.

Too proud and fundamentally decent to want to lessen someone else's joy by a brooding presence, she redoubled efforts to hide the melancholy that spiraled deeper and deeper into her heart—futile efforts for which she consoled herself, alone in her bedroom at the end of the evening, by crying freely and giving herself over to her misery.

The Vicomtesse d'Hespel, whose affection for her niece, if not enlightened, was certainly sincere, noticed the change in her mood and, with her usual astuteness, attributing it to boredom from too long a stay in the provinces, announced one morning that she was leaving for Paris in two days and wanted Nelida to go with her.

"Go with you?" Madame de Kervaens said, deeply surprised.

"Yes, my child," answered the vicomtesse. "You must have had plenty of your Breton-speaking Brittany after the eighteen months you've been vegetating here. You need to come back to Paris. I'll be your chaperone again for a few months, and we'll have fun in other ways, despite the princely train you carry on here. What can be done about it—country is still country."

"I assure you, dear aunt—I'm not at all bored."

"Little hypocrite! Your husband is more honest. I let him in on my plan and he thanked me, telling me, as a matter of fact, that since you didn't like hunting, theater, or any other pleasure of château life, it would be tyrannical of him to make you stay. Timoleon is a pearl of a husband."

"But, aunt, I can't leave him, and I know he can't leave Kervaens before winter."

"The dreaded separation—truly—four months! I didn't think you were such a turtle dove. Besides, just between us, if you're in love with your husband, leave him alone occasionally, just to add spice. Eighteen months of intimacy is

absurd, and I can't imagine that Timoleon hasn't already done a thousand crazy things on such a regimen. If you want to add to this already over-extended honeymoon, you must make a new person of yourself—become another woman. When your husband comes to Paris and finds you sought after, fashionable, he'll be flattered, maybe a little worried. He might want to compete with his rivals, which will arouse his vanity—"

"Please, aunt—don't talk that way," interrupted Nelida. "You're hurting me. I appreciate your interest, but I'm staying."

"As you wish," answered the vicomtesse, a bit irritated. "But I venture to say you'll regret it."

The conversation left a painful impression on Nelida. Although used to her aunt's thoughtless chatter, she was struck this time by a remarkable perception. The confident way the vicomtesse had said "You'll regret it" chilled her heart. It was her first glimpse into the distant possibility that Timoleon might stop loving her. He had approved of Madame d'Hespel's proposal, so he must share her ideas. But then Nelida remembered that her aunt assumed she was bored and that her husband had said, "It would be tyrannical of me to make her stay." It was from good will and affection for her that Timoleon had agreed to see her go. Rebuking herself for doubting him an instant, she regained her former serenity for several days.

XII

One afternoon everyone else had gone to the woods near Dol on a hunting expedition. After seeing the hunters off, Nelida went back to the drawing room. Without any new cause for worry, she was preoccupied, distracted, not even thinking of going back to her chambers. For several months she hadn't visited the charity and school she had founded when she first came to the region. Unhappiness constricts the soul's impulses. If it doesn't snuff out goodness entirely, it nevertheless suppresses energy and brilliance. Book in hand, she spent the morning sitting by an open window and gazing down the long avenue that Timoleon, last to leave, had taken to join the hunters. Kervaens' walls were at least eight feet thick. Nelida had chosen one of the drawing-room windows as her little retreat where, with the aid of a bamboo screen decorated with climbing plants, she was both present and secluded in the heart of the countryside. The sound of a horse's hooves at full gallop pulled her from her reverie. Monsieur de Verneuil, Timoleon's cousin, was entering the courtyard. He was an elderly bachelor of philosophical mind, stout heart, insouciant spirit, courtly manners, and irrepressible speech for whom Nelida had strong affection and who also showed her immense respect.

"I rush forward with marital directives, my beautiful cousin!" he said, leaping from his horse with the agility of a twenty year old. "But don't be alarmed. It's nothing solemn. I've just come to ask you to don your finest raiments for dinner and direct Carlier to prepare the Dauphine's

bedroom. We're having a great celebration: the Marquise Zepponi, no less!"

Monsieur de Verneuil had come to the window. Leaning on the Spanish jasmine climbing over it, he took Nelida's hand and brought it to his lips.

"You're as beautiful as an angel today, dear cousin," he went on. "So much the better. How furious they'll be, those so-called pretty women! You'll wear a white gown, won't you? And that little veil of lace that makes you look like a Madonna—. My cousin must grant me that honor," he added, looking at Nelida tenderly. "Besides, it's a matter of warfare. Your friend Hortense and your enemy the Marquise Zepponi henceforth are vanquished."

"What do you mean?" Nelida asked, slowly pulling away from her long distraction. "Madame Zepponi? I've never heard her name before."

"Really?" asked Monsieur de Verneuil in amazement. "But that's impossible."

"I assure you, I've never heard of any Marquise Zepponi."

"Very well, then, I'd do just as well to say nothing—. No, I won't. You're a woman of good sense. You need to be warned. But don't go and betray me. Since Timoleon hasn't said anything to you, he apparently has his reasons."

Nelida said nothing. Toying with a sprig of jasmine that had climbed inside the window, Monsieur de Verneuil moved the leaves softly over and over Nelida's fingers while he continued speaking:

"The marquise—or, to use the Italian style—*La* Zepponi—is a Sicilian famous for her beauty and her love affairs. Several idiots got themselves killed over her gorgeous eyes, something that gives her a much-touted distinction, as you might imagine. During his last trip to Italy, Timoleon had a fling with her, the details of which I know nothing, but it made a devil of a racket. This fling didn't turn out to my cousin's satisfaction. After shamelessly chasing after him, so they say, the marquise left him flat, without 'crowning his

torch' (as they said back in the Empire)—for a little prince ruling ten square feet of Germany. This beauty and her monarch have been traveling all over Europe for the past two years. But now, in London, they've split up. The marquise is returning to Italy alone, and I don't know through what coincidence—or rather what infernal scheme—she's landing at Cherbourg and coming to spend a week with her friend Madame Lecouvreur a few miles from here. It's clear to me she's coming to snare Kervaens in her net again. She'll have heard of you. You'd seem like someone worth deposing. The cunning actress would enjoy amusing herself at your expense. Even now she's gone into full battle mode with Timoleon, whom she just happened to meet on the hunt. But let's stand our ground, cousin; we've nothing to fear from anyone—"

Noticing a large tear slip down Nelida's pale cheek, Monsieur de Verneuil stopped.

"Ah! I'm so sorry, my dear cousin," he told her, squeezing her hand. "I've hurt you. That wasn't my intention at all. How could I have guessed you'd take it seriously?"

"You're not hurting me," Nelida said, holding back her tears. "I know it's trivial."

"Besides, you're not jealous. You're too clever for that," Monsieur de Verneuil went on. "We've all admired you for it. After all, you certainly could have dispensed with welcoming your husband's former mistress to your home and treating her like a good friend. That's high-minded—haughty, even. I love it!"

"I don't understand—" Nelida said, raising her head, her lovely, wet eyes looking straight at Monsieur de Verneuil.

"Well, well!—so you're as innocent as this jasmine—or are you making fun of me? No—on my word of honor, I think you're being honest. Very well, your friend Hortense—the lawyer's daughter, wife of Monsieur Jaquet, whom she's decorated, for the sum of six thousand francs, with the ridiculous Barony of Sognencourt—was Timoleon's mistress before your marriage. You didn't know that?"

"That's not possible!" Nelida cried out. "Hortense is a flirt, but she's trustworthy, she's decent. And Timoleon loves me too much—"

"Timoleon loves you—good Lord, I really think he does, to his credit. Who wouldn't love you? But, first of all, he owed you nothing before your marriage. Since then—listen: For eighteen months now he's been faithful to you. Eighteen months is an eternity for a man like him. As for your dear friend, she's the most vicious, silly goose I've ever met up with, and God knows I haven't lacked for comparisons—. But I'm rattling on like the old bachelor I am," Monsieur de Verneuil continued. "You need time to get ready. So once again, cousin—let's fight for our turf and not lower our banner to this blasted Italian stock."

Monsieur de Verneuil left not knowing he had released a poisoned shaft into Nelida's soul. Fortunately, she didn't have time to probe her dark thoughts. The maître-d'hôtel came almost immediately requesting his orders. Time was short. Monsieur de Verneuil's parting words had, moreover, revived her feminine instincts. She dressed with exceptional care, all the while thinking that a beautiful, daring foreigner was on the way to vie for her husband's love. Her heart pounded with anger but also with a secret wish for victory. And when she was told that the carriages were making their way down the avenue, she glanced at her mirror and saw the radiant confidence of a sovereign beauty.

It wasn't without a keen sense of smug vanity that Timoleon offered his hand to the Marquise Zepponi as she stepped from the open carriage and was escorted into the vestibule of his royal residence. The room had an air of genuine grandeur. The vault was supported by enormous pillars of composite capitals. Bits of sculpture and other artifacts, attesting both to the wealth and the good taste of their owner, highlighted the surroundings. A magnificently sculpted double door of oak spread wide, and Timoleon, giving his arm to the marquise, entered with her into a long gallery lighted from above and decorated with family portraits. At that same

moment, the smooth tapestry doorway that closed off the opposite end of the room slid on its gilded hinges, and Madame de Kervaens appeared, walking slowly toward them, followed by Monsieur de Verneuil, Monsieur de Sognencourt, and several neighbors (Hortense, complaining of a migraine, had excused herself). Timoleon flushed with pride to see Nelida so beautiful. The meeting between these two women was, in effect, without parallel. Never, perhaps, has the genius of painting or statuary created a more complete set of antitheses of youth and beauty. Neither woman was yet twenty years old. Elisa Zepponi embodied the full bloom of a type of earthly beauty that, without regard to the soul, exerts an all-the-more irresistible power over the senses. The full oval of her face, which was flushed with color, recalled the heads of Giorgione or of Raphael's third period. Her low forehead was framed by two bluish-black bands of glistening hair. Her sparkling pupils swam in fluid, like stars reflected in a spring. Her lips, always slightly parted, revealed two rows of pearlescent teeth. Her nose, whose delicate nostrils flared at the slightest emotion, the luxuriant curves of her arms and shoulders, her easy walk, even her slightly husky voice—everything about her breathed softness, promised pleasure, and whispered voluptuous ecstasy. Nelida, since her marriage, had grown stronger, with more self-assurance in her bearing. An ashen tone had spread over the gold of her hair, but her transparent skin was still as pale, and her look had lost none of its maidenly purity. When she moved forward to meet the marquise, one might have called her the calm and pensive North Muse in the presence of a laughing Athenian courtesan. The exchange of greetings between the two women was as exquisite as if nothing tumultuous at all were happening inside them. They looked at one another in the most benevolent way, spoke in the most agreeable tones. Every appearance was preserved on one side as on the other with a tact befitting the finest society.

The marquise praised everything she saw—naturally, simply, like someone used to having similar splendors. She

spoke with equanimity about her friendship for Monsieur de Kervaens and invited Nelida to come to Italy soon to see her.

Madame de Kervaens, for her part, encouraged by the admiring looks of the men in the procession around her, especially those of Monsieur de Verneuil, who was visibly relishing his superiority—Madame de Kervaens, who felt beautiful and saw unequivocal approval on her husband's face—stood up to the test, the first of its kind to which she'd been submitted, with absolute grace. She revealed herself to be considerate without affectation, both warm and dignified, almost happy. It would be difficult to say what was happening in Timoleon's heart. Finding the marquise so unexpectedly, seeing her pretty and provocative, he had felt a fierce desire to avenge himself on her, to punish her for her games. Elisa's excessive flirtations during the confusion and noise of the hunt had excited him. He forgot himself so much that he had made a new declaration of love to her. His vanity had been compromised, the battle engaged. He must win, if only for a single, triumphant day. On the other hand, he was delighted to show this disdainful woman how easy it had been for him to forget her in the company of a young and beautiful wife. Since he was, above all, a man of the world and proud of the name he bore, he was infinitely grateful to Nelida for having shown herself to be such a great lady. The day was one of the most glorious in his life. He—so measured, so impassive usually, animated by hunting, by fine wines served in profusion, by conversation sprinkled with double meanings, allusions, little secrets, biting misunderstandings—here he was, out of control of himself. More than once during the evening he squeezed Nelida's hand in delight while looking around the room to find the marquise. Once he even lifted one of his wife's long, blond curls and carried it tenderly to his lips. Monsieur de Verneuil was gleeful. The marquise began to doubt her victory and lose her composure. Soon, complaining of great fatigue, she asked if she might withdraw, and Nelida, back in her chambers, quietly gave herself over to the joy in her heart.

While her attendants unfastened her gown and veil, she reflected with overflowing happiness on the thousand small incidents that had made up the evening. She recalled each look, noted each word, was convinced that she had won back, after a moment of wandering, her husband's heart. Two hours slipped by without her even thinking of going to bed. Feeling a nervous agitation, she opened her window to breathe the pure air of the night. The weather was exceptionally mild. The stars twinkled above. Everything was quiet, everyone slept. Nelida felt an impulse to go down into the park. Covering her head and shoulders with a large shawl, she slipped quietly down a hidden staircase and left the château through a little door that she was surprised to find not closed. Because her basic impulse, in joy and sorrow, was always to reach out to God, she took, at the ravine's edge, the path to the chapel built to Saint Cornely, patron saint of Armorica, on the very spot where, according to legend, one of his most astonishing miracles occurred. With effort she opened the massive door to the sanctuary where a sacred flame burned day and night. Kneeling on the altar steps, she began to pray as she hadn't done for some time. All her youthful fervor came rushing back. Relieved of its heavy burden, her soul opened and rose joyfully toward heaven.

Suddenly, she thought she heard furtive steps on the gravel that led up to the chapel. She was afraid and stayed utterly still. The steps stopped near the door. After several minutes, hearing nothing else, she thought she was wrong and was on the verge of leaving when new, heavier steps rattled the gravel and a well-known voice said softly: "Are you there?"

"I'm over here, on the bench," came the answer.

Trembling, Nelida leaned against the baptismal font. Her husband and Hortense had come there to meet! What mysterious thing could they have to say to one another? What additional dreadful secret was she about to learn? She listened.

"Why this inopportune whim to chat in the open air and dark shadows?" Timoleon said sharply. "What do you want?"

Hortense answered in broken phrases that Nelida couldn't grasp.

"It's really just too silly," Monsieur de Kervaens continued, "that you're the one making a scene, whereas the person with a right to be jealous has shown immense sophistication and good taste."

"If your wife is blind, so much the better for you. But, whatever the case, who has more of a right than I to be jealous, Timoleon?"

And Hortense's voice took on a tender note that cut into Nelida's heart.

"Haven't I sacrificed everything for you? Didn't I pass up the best marriages for you?

"Who was asking you to do that?" interrupted Monsieur de Kervaens.

"Forgetting all your other mistakes, wasn't I the one who convinced Nelida to marry you? As soon as you asked, didn't I come running to this forsaken place to make it as lively as Nelida had made it dreary? Am I not now, once again, compromised, and haven't I played my husband for the biggest fool, all for your amusement? And you—ungrateful—when after all my sacrifice, I'm just on the point of bringing you back around—the first little fancy spirits you away—"

"It's too damp here," Timoleon said. "We'll take all this up again tomorrow. Was there anything else you wanted to say?"

Hortense began to sob. But, because they were moving away, Madame de Kervaens didn't hear the end of their conversation.

Confused and turbulent emotions swirled in Nelida's soul. What baseness their conversation exposed! How many painful experiences weighed on her innocent life! Everywhere, in every heart that had opened to her: lies and betrayal! Everywhere, duplicity answering the sincerity of her own devotion. Yet one thing in the middle of these cruel tortures almost gave her joy: Nothing new was revealed

concerning Timoleon's relationship with the marquise. Hortense herself, having only seen them together that morning at the hunt, had probably greatly exaggerated their intimacy; she hadn't witnessed what had happened that evening; she didn't know that everything had changed, that the fancy had passed.

Nelida left the chapel pondering this reassuring idea. She was, additionally, too much a woman not to have made a comparison that comforted her. Timoleon, so deferential, so full of regard for her, spoke to Madame de Sognencourt with scorn and mockery. He rendered justice, then, to them both. So it would be easy to stir his heart again to conjugal love. She went back to her bedroom, her soul open once more to hope, determined to intensify her courtesies and contrivances toward her two rivals, since Timoleon seemed so aware of such external proprieties.

Her surprise the next morning was huge when, like a thoughtful lady of the manor, she was about to check on her guests' situation, and Hortense—pale, unkempt, her chest heaving—rushed into her bedroom. Holding out an open letter, she cried in a choking voice:

"Nelida, they're betraying you! Stop your husband from leaving, or you'll be lost!"

Recognizing Timoleon's writing, Nelida read the two lines at a glance:

> *You demand it, beautiful tyrant, so I shall follow. I'll leave with you at noon and take you to Paris.*

Her eyes fixed on Nelida, her lips ashen, Hortense waited for an answer.

"What you're doing isn't worthy of you or me," Madame de Kervaens finally said, mastering a quick wave of pain. "Where did this note come from?"

"His valet was taking it to the Marquise Zepponi. Suspecting some betrayal, I snatched it from his hands, telling him I was going to deliver it myself. It's my devotion for you,

Nelida, that made me tell such a lie. It's bad," she continued, upset by the calm, cool look Madame de Kervaens fixed on her. "It's very bad—but I wanted to save you."

"Hortense," said Nelida, laying her hand on the shoulder of her treacherous friend, "I feel sorry for you. I know everything. I know what you've been to me, and I know what you are. As luck would have it, I heard your conversation outside the chapel last night."

Hortense's body jerked in shock; her face turned purple.

"Don't be afraid," Nelida said, "I won't expose you. You decide for yourself what's possible in our future relationship. As for Monsieur de Kervaens, he's completely free in his actions, and the letter that offends you is really a matter of something quite simple."

Without giving Hortense time to respond, Nelida walked out, made a long detour through the hallways so that no one could tell where she was going, then knocked on her husband's door. She had made a desperate decision.

"Come in," Timoleon said. "Ah, it's you, Nelida," he added, taking her hand with quick grace. "Aren't you very tired from last night's party? You were charming, to tell the truth. But sit down, please."

He moved an armchair forward with great respect, as if for the queen.

"Timoleon," Nelida said in a solemn tone, looking directly at him, her azure eyes veiled in tears, "I've come to beg something of you."

"Say instead that you're giving me an order," Monsieur de Kervaens answered with extravagant gallantry.

"What I have to say is serious, Timoleon. It concerns our peace of mind, our happiness."

Monsieur de Kervaens looked at her with an indefinable sense of surprise.

"Timoleon, don't leave."

"What?" he asked, concerned and trying to keep his composure. "Who's telling you I'm leaving?"

"You're leaving at noon with the Marquise Zepponi."

"But of course I am, my child," he continued, smiling with assumed nonchalance. "I'm going to drive her to Dol. As lord of the manor, it's my duty. You wouldn't want me to do otherwise."

"You're going to Paris," Nelida said firmly.

"To Paris? But I swear to you that I've never even dreamed such a thing," stammered Monsieur de Kervaens, who perhaps for the the first time in his life felt dumbfounded enough to lose his composure. "Besides, haven't I been to Paris often? How could that upset you?"

"It's not a question of being upset but of sensing that, for a whim, you're toying with both your life and mine. In the name of your father—in the name of honor—in the name of everything sacred, Timoleon—I implore you—don't go!"

And Nelida, proud Nelida, fell at her husband's knees and held him tightly in supplication. At that moment, they heard the coachman's whip and the horses' bells from the carriage in the courtyard. Someone knocked at the door.

"Get up!" Timoleon exclaimed, thrilled by the unexpected rescue. "Believe in my love and count on me."

It was Monsieur de Verneuil.

"Where in the world are you?" he exclaimed to Nelida. "Everyone's calling and looking all over for you. The marquise is downstairs in her traveling clothes. She wants to say goodbye to my beautiful cousin. But I'm not surprised to find you distracted," he added, glancing mischievously at Nelida's untidy hair and gown. "Young couples don't see or hear anything."

Nelida rushed out. Gathering all her courage, she went down to the drawing room where Madame Zepponi was waiting. The latter, not having received Timoleon's answer, was beside herself, thinking she'd been played for a fool. Nelida led her to her coach, making excuses for Monsieur de Kervaens, who, she said, was being searched in every direction. Elisa settled herself angrily in her cushions, murmuring something inaudible. The coachman snapped the whip to signal departure. The iron gate stood wide open—

"Stop!" an imperial voice rang out. "Good-bye, Nelida," Timoleon said, passing quickly by his wife. "I'm going to Dol and will be back this evening. Madame Marquise, you've allowed me the pleasure of accompanying you—"

As he hoisted himself into the coach, the marquise's eyes beamed with joy. She looked triumphantly toward the château. The coach disappeared. Nelida rushed to close herself in her bedroom and fall down, with her face on the floor, pleading for death.

XIII

Silence reigned in the feudal estate where, a week before, fanfares, concerts, balls, and merrymaking had resounded. Hortense had abruptly left without daring to show herself to Nelida again. Curious to know what had happened to Timoleon and the marquise, Monsieur de Verneuil had taken the coach to Paris. The neighbors had returned to their homes. Alone, with no news of her husband, Nelida fell prey to bitter melancholy. A fever began slowly to consume her. Her thoughts refused to focus on any specific subject. Every activity became impossible. Her only wish was for total self-abandonment. Poor woman! In the springtime of life, she saw a long succession of days without a single joy within them—a misfortune caused by the man to whom she had sworn eternal tenderness and respect. The thought crushed her. Hour after weary hour dragged by. Night brought no sleep. Each morning she waited for a letter that didn't come. This ever-fresh anxiety, this ever-more-cruelly disappointed hope caused enormous pain. Finally, two weeks after her husband's departure, she received the following letter:

> *You'll forgive me, won't you, my sweet angel, for not having given in to a childish whim—the first I've seen in you, and very likely the last. Well-bred individuals like ourselves owe one another total liberty, since it's certain they'd be unwilling to abuse it. I'm leaving for Milan with Madame Zepponi. She hasn't found the person in Paris who was supposed to accompany her, and I can't allow her to make such a long journey*

alone. Whatever anyone might say to you about this trip of sheer courtesy, don't listen to malicious gossip. Don't give those jealous of you the pleasure of seeing you upset. Go to Paris. Prepare to open your home at the start of the winter season. I'll be delighted to learn you're having fun and receiving all the success you deserve.

Yours,
Timoleon

P.S. I almost forgot to tell you that I may take the long route back—that is, through Algeria and Spain. The travel-demon whispers in my ear. I'll gladly sacrifice to him. He's always been good to me.

The letter was Nelida's crowning blow. Without being fully conscious of it, she had in childlike innocence periodically thought that, once he left her, her husband would be stricken with overwhelming guilt. She had waited for his crisis of conscience—an outpouring, a return. Imagining the most gracious of pardons, she promised herself to make him forget his mistake by her manifold tendernesses and considerations. She read and reread the letter twenty times—so strange, so polite, so icy, so uncaring about her own suffering. Everything she had first glimpsed with horror about the world and its ways, then, was true. The best of men flagrantly practiced the most despicable selfishness. The wedding bond was a sham committing one to nothing more than mutual politeness, and sworn fidelity didn't have an atom's worth of weight on the scales of whimsy. Timoleon was neither bothered nor emotional. He didn't hesitate. He seemed to be doing the simplest thing in the world. He even seemed to think that Nelida would feel no pain, since he urged her to amuse herself and wished for her success and pleasure.

Several times, Nelida tried to answer. She started, tore up, and started again more than twenty letters. None said

exactly what she meant. Either she found the expression too indifferent, or she thought she had let her pain show too clearly. She was as concerned about angering Timoleon with criticism as she was about reassuring him unduly with feigned acceptance. And every time, sobs interrupted her. Her tears fell onto the paper, and the desolate labor had to be done again. An entire week went by this way. Her strength gave out. She no longer left her room. Her eyes lost their luster. Her breathing became imperceptible. Almost as if with regret, life slowly drained from her lovely body, in the flower of its youth and beauty.

"There's a young man downstairs who has come on the count's behalf," said the valet, entering his mistress's room one afternoon. "He's bringing a painting for the chapel."

"Show him in," Nelida said, her heart pounding at the idea of seeing someone with whom Timoleon had very likely spoken, someone perhaps bringing her a message. As if she were about to appear before her husband, she quickly stepped into her dressing room to throw over her unkempt hair the white-lace veil that Timoleon liked. On returning to her room, she was astonished to see, leaning on the marble mantelpiece, the pale, serious, gloomy figure of Guermann! She thought she was seeing a ghost. She stood still a moment, then, gripped by childish terror, uttered a small cry and rushed to the door.

"Please, madame," Guermann said, blocking her way and bringing her almost by force to her armchair, where she collapsed. "Please, listen to me! Whatever you might think, I come in friendship—devoted, unselfish friendship, ready to help in any way."

Kneeling by her chair, he continued speaking while Nelida, without movement and without strength, looked at him wildly.

"You must hate me, madame. You must feel contempt. You must have seen my behavior as unspeakably deceitful—"

So stunned she couldn't utter a sound, Nelida gestured in a way that commanded silence.

"Please, at least agree to listen to me," he said. "I'm leaving in an hour. Have pity on me. I've suffered so much! I have a right to your pity. I've lost my poor mother. She died in my arms just a month ago. Now I have no one in the world who loves me and suffers with me, madame!"

"Your mother!" Nelida said. And her tears began to fall.

"No one, madame," Guermann continued. "Because the woman you saw, the woman who told you she belonged to me—is nothing, has never meant anything to me. Oh, if I could have opened my heart to you back then! You'd have forgiven me, you'd have thought even better of me, maybe, knowing the voluntary martyrdom I was enduring and my love's desperate struggle to remain worthy of you. But I couldn't. My lips were sealed by profound respect. You were going to marry a wealthy nobleman. I convinced myself he would know how to make your life at least pleasant and comfortable, if not happy—whereas I had no fame, no status, no money. Poor fool! I lacked courage. How I punished myself! I'll tell you later what unbelievable strategems I used in order to find out what you were doing almost by the day. For a year I thought you were satisfied, and I was resigned. But for the last two months I've been watching an abyss open beneath your feet. I see you betrayed by everyone you love, alone, like me—even more than me—because ultimately I have my Muse, my holy Muse—encouraging me and saving me. But you—who'll save you? The world will pull you in, seduce you—"

"Never!" cried Nelida, no longer finding Guermann's presence at Kervaens strange and now feeling the inexplicable calm that comes, in the greatest despair, when a human voice sympathizes with one's distress.

"You think so today," Guermann said, "but tomorrow, a month from now, a year from now—. Solitude will eat you alive," he added, standing, then sitting beside her. "Poor woman! You've really been worn down, already ravaged by suffering."

"My husband will come back," Nelida said.

"He won't come back," interrupted Guermann. "And if he does, your fate won't be any better. He could never understand—he'll never even guess—that a soul like yours holds divine treasures. He's a man who's been given all the treasures earth can provide. The joys of heaven are forbidden to him—"

"Let's not talk about him," Nelida said. "Let's talk about your poor mother—"

"With her, all the pleasures of my childhood also died," Guermann went on. "All the forgiveness that floated over my flaws, all the simple and pious words whose sound made me better—. Oh, a mother—a mother!" he continued, standing up and pacing the room with an agitation he no longer tried to control. "None of us knows, when we lose her, all we had because of her: First love that comes before we come and waits for us to be born! First ray of light that casts out the darkness of our understanding! First smile that keeps watch and helps focus our first look! First kiss that drinks our first tear! First word that calls the first smile from our lips! Oh, mother, mother—since I've lost you, I feel alone on the earth—"

Nelida whose birth had caused her mother's death, Nelida who had no son, listening to the artist's passionate words, felt the first grip of a sadness that carried her, like rushing waters, far beyond the isolation of her own pain. For the first time she heard inside herself an echo of misery's great voice rising in the breast of humanity, like a dark choir that, once heard, leaves a dread in the soul that forever shames egotistical consolations and childish wishes. Confusedly, she glimpsed the sad equality of all human suffering. She felt that Guermann was her brother in pain. She gave him her hand:

"Let the past be forgotten," she said. "We'll never speak of it again. We're both hurting deeply. Let's be strong. If my friendship matters to you, know that you once more hold it completely."

"You're an angel!" the young man exclaimed, taking her hand emotionally. "Speak—order me—what can I do for you? Do you want your freedom back? Do you want revenge?"

"Revenge?" Nelida asked, her smile reflecting Christian compassion. "And from whom? Oh, Guermann, let God forgive my mistakes the way I forgive—"

She couldn't say the name. Trying to control her emotion, she stood up, walked to the window, and came back in a few minutes with tears in her eyes to sit beside Guermann. Not daring to follow her, he had remained standing, his eyes fixed on her empty armchair.

"Have you worked a great deal during the past eighteen months?" she asked, her voice softer.

He looked at her a long time as if he had not quite understood the question and was searching faraway memories.

"Worked?" he said at length. "Oh, yes, I've worked a lot. Does that still interest you? My beloved Naiad! She's been wildly successful. I was paid very well for her. I sold her, Nelida—sold the creation you inspired, sold a portion of my soul and my blood to a businessman—sold it to buy a little plot of sanctified ground. Ah, poverty! My mother's mortal remains couldn't be honored except by dishonoring my Muse!"

And in his turn the distressed artist began to weep like a child. Broken and restored several times in this way, the conversation went on for hours. In their unhappiness, Guermann and Nelida fell under the charm of influence: the charm of young and sympathetic hearts that carries them through even the cruellest heartbreaks. The château clock, signaling mealtime, drew them out of the dual reverie. Nelida looked at Guermann uncertainly.

"It's the signal for my departure, isn't it?" he said to her. "The noble lord of Kervaens would prefer not to offer hospitality to a poor artist—. But I almost forgot," he continued, pulling a billfold from his pocket. "Excuse me. Here's

a letter from your aunt, and I haven't thought to give it to you."

Nelida took in her hands a small, satiny note, lavishly scented with amber, and read:

> *My dear niece, our friend Guermann, who, by the way, has had the most remarkable success in the world with his show, is making an artist's tour of Brittany. I've told him to go see you and draw your beautiful profile for me. I want to put it in the room where you lived before your marriage. I thought you might not mind such a distraction and have assigned our sweet Guermann the duty of persuading you to come back sooner rather than later. Good-bye, my child, etc.*

"Do you know what's in this letter?" Nelida asked, looking at Guermann sharply.

"I think it concerns a portrait. But if you don't want me to stay, I'll leave. And yet I wouldn't have bothered you much, it seems to me. I wouldn't be a burden to you. I would show up only when you ask me to. Only you would know that there is, under the same roof, a friend who sympathizes with you, who understands you, who suffers alongside you—. It's the humblest consolation one can offer, but you would make me proud if you'd agree to accept it!"

The maître-d'hôtel came to announce that the countess was served. Without answering Guermann, Nelida linked her arm into his. Silent and dreamlike, they descended the double-banistered staircase, at whose base a sphinx in black marble spread her motionless wings and smiled her dreadful smile.

Several days went by without Guermann pursuing any intimate conversation with Nelida. He came out of the room she had prepared for him in one of the towers (where he had the broadest panorama and the best light for painting) only at the time for outings. Nelida had resumed the duty of visiting the hospital and school belonging to her poor

chosen ones. Guermann accompanied her because she was still too weak to walk by herself. As with all eminent artists, he had the gift of attraction that seduces and captivates even the the most unsophisticated people. The village children followed him, and having sometimes seen him take a pencil to sketch a picturesque face or costume, they begged him for *pictures*. The old women recounted, with great detail and no concern for the fact that he didn't understand their language, stories covering the last half-century's worth of failed harvests and animals dead before their time. He was generous. He knew how to give gracefully. With him, Nelida rediscovered the joys of charity, so long forgotten.

During meals and in the presence of servants, conversation centered on questions of general interest, most often on art, occasionally also on recent publications by social reformers, and on developments in the ideas of the Saint-Simonians, the Fourierists, the *humanitarians* (as they were then called), producing a bizarre form of confusion in Guermann's mind, by nature more impassioned than logical. At night, when Nelida was too overwhelmed by worries to talk, he went to the library to read books to her that she'd never opened. Rousseau made up the principal fare of these readings. Even after her marriage, Madame de Kervaens had remained under the sway of her convent education, not daring to yield to the temptation of reading philosophical work. Father Aimery, like all those of his order, showed himself full of indulgence for weaknesses of the flesh but pitiless with intellectual boldness. He damned without mercy the whole of philosophy and, making the sign of the Cross, spoke only of those *atheists*, in whose name he indiscriminately branded all thinkers who had questioned nature, science, and reason in their struggle to find the key to the human enigma.

Nelida was quite naively surprised to encounter so great a number of ideas which, until then, had remained foreign to her. Interest in these lofty religious questions plumbed by a mind as spiritual as Rousseau's couldn't fail to grip Nelida

and overcome the listlessness of her faculties. The eloquence of the author of *Emile* gave her chills of admiration and sympathy. Too unaccustomed yet to metaphysical language's subtleties to perceive the abyss between Catholic dogma and the Savoyard vicar's profession of faith, she listened uncritically and let herself innocently be led step by step, without a hitch, over the gradual slope and beyond revealed teaching and orthodox belief. And so the days followed one another—sad, strange, and gentle. Under the salutary influence of the charity that rejuvenated her heavy heart and the study that uplifted her intelligence, Nelida came almost to the point of accepting her harsh fate.

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XIV

Guermann loved Nelida passionately. He loved her with his whole imagination and all of his pride—the two reigning forces in his life. In describing her power over him, he hadn't misled her. The childhood story he told her was true in every way; Nelida's image and the first awakenings of his genius were comingled in his mind; the first beating of his heart had been for art and for her. To conquer glory and conquer Nelida was for him one and the same desire.

Guermann was gifted with unusual qualities. He had what seemed to be every mark of genius: a lively perception, a contagious enthusiasm, a marvelous facility, fire in his words and brush, a relentless will, an indomitable pride, and a thirst for beauty in all its forms. But there was nevertheless in his makeup an immense void that numbed his gifts and made them seem lethal to himself and others. His was a capacity for expansion alone. He lacked the ability to concentrate—the one that forms philosophers, great souls, and true artists. He was dominated by all his instincts, by contradictory impulses that nothing else guided or checked. Guermann was incapable of conceptualizing a frame of reference broader than himself and of putting himself within it. Ultimately, he lacked a conscience, and his entire knowledge of good and evil was the success or failure of his fierce desires. Though gifted with a grandly generous nature, he was, in fact, appallingly egoistic. Circumstances had contributed more than a little to fortify his undisciplined character. No counterweight balanced his whims. His early village education, under the eyes of a subjugated mother, scarcely

existed, and, from the day his calling proclaimed itself, almost all of his time was devoted to the direct practice of his art. Left to his own devices in this way, he read a lot because he was hungry for knowledge, but he read all kinds of books, good and bad, sublime and detestable, without method or care. Disorder became his habit of mind; thirst for the impossible consumed his heart.

Love for Mademoiselle de la Thieullaye, from the first moment he felt it, nearly drove him mad. As a result of dreaming of her—compounded by their chance childhood meeting and the similarities he thought he saw between them—he convinced himself in good faith that Nelida was destined for him. He never for a moment thought he might lose her. To give credit where due, Guermann would have pulled back or at least hesitated had he been able to perceive his plan in such a light. Rather, he so totally believed himself destined for greatness that he privately congratulated the beautiful aristocrat whose lot it was to be handed over to the illustrious commoner. Certain to carry her to glory, he saw nothing but sublimity in their union. Nothing would have shocked him more than to hear he might be wrong to provoke and accept sacrifices whose dimensions he couldn't remotely fathom.

One can imagine his feelings when he learned from the working-class girl he lived with that Nelida had come to see him. He made her repeat twenty times every detail of that visit. He guessed everything. He deemed himself master of his presumed destiny. Determining also, however, that the right moment had not yet come, he decided not to risk the brazen challenge he wanted to fling at society without first making a name for himself to arm him sufficiently for battle on equal terms. He let eighteen months go by with the patience born of certainty.

The exhibition was a personal triumph. The crowd gathered enthusiastically before his painting, and his name, new to the art world, spread from ear to ear. With the exaggeration natural to a new cause, the Parisian press repre-

sented his work to Europe as the restoration of modern painting, like that of a young Raphael whose glory eclipsed everything his predecessors had done.

It was on the crest of this dizzying wave that he learned, through sources he had cultivated in the vicomtesse's household, the incidents recounted earlier. He didn't waver; his hour had struck. Nelida was unhappy, abandoned; his task was to free and avenge her. Then he would finally be able to reveal all his scorn, all the resentment brooding in his heart from the day he first became aware of society's inequities. He would level prejudice, show the dazzled and conquered world the omnipotence of genius, thereby obliterating all distinctions invented by men, breaking the aristocracy's pride, and subjecting to his power the beauty, virtue, and honor of this peerless woman! Nothing seemed simpler than to shake to its foundations the tottering social edifice that had made no place for him. He steadfastly believed that in satisfying his selfish passion he would usher in the awaited era of a new liberty and a new equality.

This dream recurred at varying pitches of fever. Such chimeras have appeared to more than one young commoner of this melancholy age. An honest person will recollect that between the day his studies ended and the day poverty forced him to ply his trade, night upon night slipped by in breathless pursuit of such illusions of unchecked pride. Maybe he smiles to remember how he embraced a host of phantoms in his dreams, how he placed on his head many a crown whose weight would have crushed him if destiny had heeded those childish ambitions of delirious vanity.

From the moment Guermann saw Madame de Kervaens, he was convinced of having lost none of his power over her. As much as ever, he saw that he could move her soul, engage her mind, seduce her imagination. But he soon saw as well that he would fail in the face of a single obstacle incomprehensible to him: the simple notion of duty—something all of his counterarguments couldn't manage to change. Alone, far from all eyes, with no other guide than

herself and authorized somewhat by her husband's unworthy desertion of her, Nelida held a no less strict reserve and unbending sentiment of conjugal honor. Guermann's love burrowed its way inside her, but she maintained such exterior dignity and noble purity that the churning and hotheaded artist dared risk nothing. Silently, he bated his breath.

If Nelida had been more experienced or less fundamentally honest or, simply, if the idea of evil could have approached her, she would have feared the danger she exposed herself to by receiving under her roof, in complete solitude, a man she had passionately loved. Even the slightest degree of self-scrutiny would have shown her that her sudden resignation to a desolate condition, her even more overflowing enthusiasms for charity, the appeal of their stirring literary readings, and, finally, the strength and health that were visibly returning to her—all these things had and could have only one cause: love. She would have understood it was impossible, in the desperate spot where Guermann found her, to accept the attentions or even the presence of another. She would have asked herself if her arm could have leaned with such abandon on that of Monsieur de Verneuil if a reading by Monsieur de Sognencourt had so touched the innermost fibers of her heart. But Nelida was too guileless to be prudent; she knew no more about distrusting herself than about distrusting others.

A month slipped by in this way. Each day Guermann felt more certain of being loved and more certain also of not being taken to heart. His pride was mortally wounded. All his negative passions were unleashed in a furious battle in his soul. Calmer on the surface, Nelida was assaulted from within by an insidious poison that drop by drop seeped to the core of her being without yet giving overt symptoms. But the first chance occurrence would wipe out this deadly security.

One evening during the last days of July, the two young solitaries of Kervaens were, as usual, seated near one another in the downstairs salon. The whole day had been

stormy. At that moment, thunder rumbled above the château. Lightning splayed across the sky, penetrating the tightly drawn damask curtains and throwing flashes of brilliance through the room's darkness. A single lamp glowed on the table and book where Guermann was reading, feverishly and in a halting voice, the confessions of Saint-Preux to Julie in the first letters of Rousseau's *New Heloise*. Nelida, who for several nights had once more lost sleep and at this moment felt the debilitating effects of the electrically charged air, left her seat to lie on a divan a little farther off. Guermann felt a childish irritation. Not daring to stop reading, from time to time he threw a searching glance toward Nelida, still hoping to capture an emotion on her face that answered his own. But that high, pale forehead, that serious mouth, that madonnalike body wrapped in white garments betrayed no tumultuous stir.

Irritated by a calm that seemed almost insulting, Guermann spoke louder and more intensely. In vain, he even began to declaim certain passages with a power and gesture that left no doubt as to their direct application to Nelida, who remained motionless, not interrupting, not opening her eyes. No fold of her gown whispered against the silk of the divan. Only the regular, less and less articulated sound of her breathing could be heard. Indignant, out of patience, bolstered by the resonance of his voice in the echoing space, Guermann threw the book across the room and approached, determined finally to express to this cold-hearted woman who chose to understand nothing all the burning ardor and violent desire he felt for her. But suddenly he stopped, seeing that she had either fallen asleep or fainted. Nelida's eyes were closed, her mouth colorless; her limp arm had slipped off the cushions.

"Nelida!" said Guerman, alarmed in spite of himself over her stillness.

She didn't answer.

"Nelida!" he said again.

She didn't move.

Horrified, he put his hand over her heart and, whether by chance or design, pushed aside the folds of her gown. Startled, he saw the most beautiful form his artist's eye had ever beheld. The view made him dizzy.

"Oh, my beauty!" he exclaimed, pulling her tightly to him. "Wake up to my kiss, I love you—"

Nelida opened her eyes. Regaining her senses suddenly, she tore herself from Guermann, who didn't try to stop her, so daunting the look she gave him. She then moved slowly, without speaking, to the window. Opening it in spite of the storm, she leaned out over the balcony, just beginning to receive thick drops of rain. Guermann sank to the spot she had just left, his shoulders heaving.

XV

Back in her own quarters, Nelida spent the rest of the night prey to one of those crises that only the most astonishing contrasts in our nature—the battle against the most violent temptations, most contrary movements, most irreconcilable positions—can bring to life and understanding.

Under the double action of the storm igniting the air and this long-repressed, youthful fever bursting forth, Nelida saw herself, as if in a lightning flash, faced with a terrible truth. The scales fell from her eyes. For the second time her existence, which she thought immutably fixed, was rocked to its foundations. Reappearing in her life, Guermann was once again seizing control of it. The man she had fled, the one she could have hated, the one she thought she scorned, had now come back to her through an invincible force and was once more ruler of all her thoughts.

In such a situation, a less vigorous nature would have found illusory strength in indecision. Most women, weak willed, whimsical, and unable to probe their conscience with a steady hand, deny danger in order to avoid combat. They magnify the power of their virtue so as to disguise their weakness. Such tricks weren't compatible with Nelida's sincerity of being, which had never even slightly been altered by mottoes or worldly models. She wasn't the type of woman who, half consenting, would let herself slide imperceptibly downhill, feeling guilty and regretful for errors that daily became worse. She knew how to cast a cold eye over the full expanse of her wrongs. She dared tell herself that just one day more, one such hour, and she was lost. Trembling, she

understood that there was no remedy other than immediate decision, no virtue but extreme action. She must flee Guermann, raise an insurmountable wall between him and her, never see him again. Flee—but where? Where seek refuge? With whom? Whom could she ask for help for this force so contrary to self, that pushes even the most steadfast souls to confess need in the hour of trial? Timoleon? At the thought, outrage made her turn pale, as the righteous pride of an honorable, offended heart rose up inside her. A voice within cried out that such weakness would be an irreparable mistake. That creature so unworthy of esteem, who had exerted over her inexperience the easy seduction of a first attraction, wasn't capable, she clearly felt, either of understanding or sustaining the heroism of great sacrifice. He would drag her down again, keeping her with him in a silly, meaningless sphere and quickly snuffing out the elements of grandeur and strength that passion had just awakened in her heart. What awaited her with Timoleon, even assuming he might allow himself to be drawn back by the vague impulses of duty and tenderness, was a moral solitude worse than death or a parade of distractions she could no longer imagine without disgust.

When great love has quickened a noble heart, when the sense of eternal truth has thus entered a powerful soul, all passing codes of propriety, all small-minded standards of society shrink and vanish in a way that initially leads one to pity their passing; then, one simply stops believing in their existence. For Nelida, there was no other choice than between life and death: To live for an immense, uncontrollable, and endless love; or to die, if loyalty to hasty vows, already broken by the one receiving them, commanded her to suppress her love.

No middle ground between unbounded freedom and rigid duty came to her mind. The holy pride of frail chastity wasn't insulted an instant in this noble woman's heart. To harbor an adulterous sentiment under the conjugal roof, to yield to a lover while still belonging to a spouse, to walk

surrounded by a praise the world lavishes on false appearances, to enjoy, finally, cowardly and furtive pleasures in the shadow of a lie—are the vulgar wisdoms of women that nature made incapable both of the good they know and of the evil seducing them—unable either to submit or to revolt, as lacking in the courage that resigns them to chains as in the boldness that wills itself to freedom!

Nelida was not made this way.

The thunder had stopped rumbling. A north wind came up and swept the storm away. The chapel clock struck four. In the glimmers of dawn, sparrows under the eaves awoke one by one and called each other mournfully from time to time. Gripped by a piercing, predawn chill, scantily clothed, seated motionless in a large black, wooden armchair turned away from the chimney, where the bottled wind moaned desolately, Nelida, alone before God, battled the rising anguish of a mortal agony that would sketch across her fine brow the first, indelible wrinkle.

Suddenly, she thought she heard footsteps in the hallway leading to her bedroom. Her breath stopped. No doubt: The steps were coming closer, pausing at her door. The key turned in the lock. Who would come at such an hour of the night, after such an evening? Who but the center of all her dreams—Guermann.

Seeing him, she felt no surprise, fear, or anger. She knew their moment together had come. The words they were about to exchange would be the ultimate summation. Several minutes, heavy with waiting, went by.

"It's good that you don't speak," said Guermann, moving toward her. "I couldn't bear hard words from you right now; I know from now on your lips will say nothing else. I'm going away. I wanted to see you one more time before I leave a place you've made me love and hate. I wanted to say a last good-bye before the shadows clear, during the storm of the night—of my heart. You're so beautiful," he added more passionately, "that if I saw you again in daylight, all my pride would disappear; I would fall in a heap at your feet;

you'd see me merely as your slave. That won't happen. You won't have that victory. Your heart has no love in it. You'll never lead anyone to celestial spheres. You have only Beatrice's beauty. It's over, I know. For me, there's no longer love, happiness, or glory on earth. All of that was in you—was you. You as you might have been, had I been able to kindle in your soul the fire that consumes mine. But not the way you are—unfeeling and coolly guarded. You've closed your eyes to proof of undying love. You'd rather keep pining anxiously in the tawdry bonds of a self-absorbed wisdom.

"Good-bye, poor, fainthearted woman," he said, slowly placing his hand on Nelida's bowed head, above her trembling form. "I bid my divine illusion, my lofty hope, my portion of immortality good-bye. May heaven's mercy rest on your fragile brow! May you never fully know the wrong you do! Farewell."

"You won't leave alone!" exclaimed Nelida, raising herself and seizing Guermann's arm. "You won't leave alone because—I love you!"

Joy and pride flashed through the artist's eyes. His heart stood still, and he began trembling convulsively, almost falling.

"Do you have such wild courage?" he finally uttered, not daring to lift his eyes to Nelida's, fearful of being misled again. "Are you capable of such sublime devotion?"

Speaking these words, his mouth, in spite of himself, contracted ironically.

"I feel every kind of courage, except the courage to lie," she said.

In response, Guermann drew her to him, intoxicated. No pen can describe the ecstasies that follow agonies like these. The dream of his fiery soul came true at the very moment that he thought it was lost. The impossible had happened: Nelida was his. Neither earth nor sky could hold his joy.

Part Four

XVI

Few terrains on earth have the force of nature to shape character more imposingly than do the Swiss Alps. None perhaps speaks a language more harmonious to passion's instincts. Traces of civilization vanish in these solitudes of granite and snow. The world's voice drowns in the waterfall's roar. The very memory of hindrances to our desires brought on by law and custom fades on the bed of these shadowy valleys where pastoral life unfolds in proud and tranquil grace, where everything renews the soul's lost joy in primitive simplicity, suggesting a contempt for vanity and inviting the peaceful embrace of unequivocal happiness.

Sad, brooding, turned inward during the long way they had just come, and hardly aware of the passionate tenderness and constant attentions with which Guermann had tried to end her painful silence, Nelida, crossing the frontier, felt a crushing weight rise from her. In spite of her depression, the gigantic proportions of the panoramas unfolding before her amazed eyes pulled her beyond herself. The invigorating smell of pine forests, the healthy mountain air, the rich scent of fertile pastures entered her pores and made the blood, that had seemed frozen in her veins, circulate again. Her physical well-being vigorously resisted her moral anguish.

Guermann anxiously kept watch over these first signs of a return to life. Seeing the happy effect of new horizons and grandiose solitudes on Nelida's face, he was eager to leave the open roads and plunge with her into the Alps' less traveled parts. With the help of a reliable guide, he was willing to risk difficult ascents, inhospitable lodgings, fatigue, hunger—even danger. Near sunset, he was delighted to see his tired companion hurry the mule's step to reach the rustic inn, sit down with a child's appetite at the clothless table where they were served a more-than-frugal meal, and throw herself exhausted on a crude pallet where sleep came instantly to close her eyes. All communication between them and the outside world momentarily ceased. No letter, no newspaper could reach them on the unpredictable mountain roads. Guermann talked to Nelida only of the future that lay before them. With fiery strokes he painted the bliss of solitude and relentless work and the blessed passion of unchanging affection. His speech was an endless canticle, an enthusiastic hymn to love. Everything he saw, everything he heard gave color to his passionate descriptions. He used all nature as his witness, invoking, inviting it to share his joy. The magic of his word transformed reality into visions of splendor.

One evening they had come to one of the upper Faulhorn plateaus, above the line of fir trees, at an elevation where they saw only stunted moss and the pale snow flower called *ranunculus glacialis*. A little lake of dark water held them at its brink for a few minutes. The guide told them that no fish could live there. No chamois had ever come there to drink. No bird's wing had ever grazed its surface.

At that moment Vega rose above the horizon and cast a long, luminous, and trembling furrow across the sleeping waters.

"My love!" Guermann exclaimed, putting his arm invitingly around Nelida and pointing to the vaulted sky, "See how that sweet, pure star pities the damned soul, how it consoles him! That's how you, like a star of salvation, rose up over my life—"

Nelida leaned on the artist's shoulder. Tears of joy spilled down her cheek.

Nelida's passion for Guermann was such that it could give either life or death. Moreover, her courageous and passionate nature couldn't stay long in the inertia caused by her initial remorse. She was soon reprimanding herself for it, as if for a weakness. In overflowing admiration for her lover, she told herself that such greatness went beyond all human laws. The strange, solitary life she led with Guermann sustained her exaltation. She was able to persuade herself that every sacrifice, even that of conscience, remained an insufficient acknowledgment of such love. Totally abandoning herself to the harshness of her happiness, she accepted, without further hesitation, all the consequences of her reluctant transgression.

A month of endless enchantment and perpetual magic went by. No one who has not experienced it could imagine the enormous capacity for joy in a human heart that courageously rejects everything in its way. Far from jealous hatreds, everyday cares, the world and its sordid influence, it can truly surrender itself to the ecstasies of God-given love and devotion. Those who have drunk the intoxicating cup, who cry that it broke in their hands, that the shattering of its pure crystal caused wounds that will never heal: Cowardly souls! Timid hearts! The misfortune must not be insulted: It is sacred. These individuals are destiny's elect! As closely as is given to frail humanity, they have approached God. In their joy and sorrow, their despair and ecstasy, they have plumbed the full mystery of life.

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XVII

Waking up one morning, Nelida sharply felt the cold and noticed, through the narrow window of the chalet where she'd spent the preceding week, that the summit of the mountain she'd climbed the day before was covered by a white mantle whose brilliance dazzled her eyes. The first snow had fallen. The north wind, announcing winter, had surprised the little valley. Now they would need to find a safer haven. Nomadic life was about to become impractical. Guermann suggested that they spend the harsh season in Geneva. He had a friend there, a former classmate who had left painting to take over the family business, whose benefits assured him an easy life.

"He'll help get you comfortably settled," Guermann told Nelida, who was dismayed at the prospect of leaving the isolated chalet. "And then—forgive me for talking about my worries—but it would help me find a way to open an atelier, give lessons, maybe do a few portraits. My small savings won't last forever. And—you know our agreement—you know you've become the companion of a Bohemian, an artist with no money, determined never to accept the charity of your wealth. You know you've agreed to share his lot—"

"When do we go?" Nelida asked, silencing his lips with her pretty white hand.

They slowly prepared to leave. Nelida had precious treasures to protect from the hazards of travel: plants from Alpine paths, crystallized rocks from the edge of glaciers, fragments of jasper and agate, grebe feathers, and pretty artifacts hewn and sculpted by mountain shepherds from

soft yew wood and chamois horns. For the pure of heart, the simple joy of contemplation continues through life's difficult moments.

They arrived in Geneva three days later.

Immediately after they climbed out of their coach at the inn, Guermann left to look for his friend. For the first time since her flight, Nelida was alone. Because Guermann was busy setting them up and apparently wouldn't return before day's end, Nelida's first impulse was to open his travel case and take what she needed to write letters. For some time she had felt an insurmountable need, which she repressed for fear of displeasing Guermann: She wanted to write her aunt and even her unfaithful friend, not to exculpate herself in their eyes or humbly beg forgiveness, but to express a warm word to both, assuring them once again of her affection. She picked up the quill and wrote the letters in a firm hand.

To the Vicomtesse d'Hespel

My dearly beloved aunt, what shall I write you? Alas, what can I write? I wouldn't know how to justify myself, even less accuse someone else. I know my error, deplore it, suffer from it, and will so suffer the rest of my life. But at least let me be granted the privilege of denying with all my strength the reproach of ingratitude, indifference, or neglect that you may direct toward me. No, dear aunt—nothing has been erased. Your maternal kindness, your boundless indulgence—all are etched more deeply in my heart with every passing day. I dare flatter myself with the thought of seeing you again. My fate condemns me to isolation. But let me hope that, if we should not find one another again in this world, our prayers at least will meet at the feet of God. I would consider myself fortunate to have news of you occasionally, and you would overwhelm me with gratitude if you didn't make me wait too long.

To the Baroness de Sognencourt

Hortense! Hortense! You've hurt me deeply, but surely you're grieving in the depths of your heart because you're good, Hortense, and because you care for me, I'm certain of it. I won't insult you by offering my forgiveness; that's God's affair. How well I now understand that certain passions are stronger than our wills and that, with the best, most honorable of intentions, we can be led astray!

I don't dare write my husband, but, I beg you, tell me about Timoleon. Tell me where he is, what he's doing, whether or not he seems happy. It may be difficult for you to comprehend, but I haven't stopped thinking of him. Alas! If he had agreed to make a small sacrifice for me, he would have bound me to him forever in passionate gratitude.

I'm in Geneva for an extended period. I won't be seeing anyone. From now on, my whole life is devoted to a single being, a being so noble and great that I should speak to him only on my knees. I won't tell you I'm happy. I wouldn't know how to fool myself. I'm not and will never be. The memory of my past is a dark presence that will never desert me. But I live in total self-abnegation, absorbed, lost in the life of another, in the contemplation of an immortal genius.

Hortense, write me. Let's join hands through our sadness, through our mistakes. Hortense, I feel that I still care for you. And you?

Nelida had scarcely finished the two letters when Guermann returned. He didn't notice her eyes swollen from weeping.

"I found Anatole," he told her in high spirits. "We're lucky. He led me to the top of town, to a charming house where he lives alone and where he's going to rent us a little place with a delightful view of the Jura Mountains. It's an

attic room, to be honest, my poor Nelida. You probably know what that is only through hearsay. But, as I've told you, it's part of my honor to avoid the slightest appearance of luxury. You'll be brave, I know, and you'll climb with your two angelic feet the six flights of stairs to our humble dwelling—to my paradise," he added, kneeling in front of her and kissing her pretty feet one after the other. "I also rented an atelier on the same street. I made a deal with an upholsterer who's going to give us, at a good price, very simple furnishings never used by anyone else. Anatole wants to honor you with an Erard piano that he says no one uses at his home. Tomorrow he's coming for us with his horses to move us to his palace. Are you happy with your majordomo, Nelida?"

"Do I really have to see Monsieur Anatole?" asked Nelida, alarmed at the prospect of being in a stranger's presence (until then she had evaded all eyes). "I'd rather not."

"That's impossible," Guermann answered. "You'll need him every minute."

"Will I, Guermann? Can I need anyone in the world except you!"

He took her hand and kissed it exuberantly.

"Make this small sacrifice for me, Nelida," he continued. "Anatole knows all the social graces. He won't take advantage of your consent. Complete solitude won't do you any good. Believe me, if only for entertainment, you'll be very happy to have conversations from time to time with someone other than me."

Nelida smiled incredulously and agreed, as she always did. At noon the next day, Guermann introduced her to his friend Anatole who, in spite of the discreet reserve he maintained, couldn't help taking several long, surprised looks at Nelida, making her feel extremely uncomfortable.

The sight of her new home diverted her. It was a clean, cheerful mansard apartment. The drawing room had two windows whose view stretched over the expanse of the Rhone River and the blue-belted Jura Mountains. The piano took

up one side of the room. A large sofa, an overstuffed armchair, and a basket of flowers gave it a pleasant aspect.

"It goes without saying, madame," Anatole said, offering Nelida a place to sit, "that my garden is entirely at your disposal. Arrange it as you please. You'll never see anyone, not even the owner," he added, smiling, "whose work keeps him at a dreary counter all day. But I'm forgetting something," he said, turning to Guermann. "We have at this moment in Geneva an excellent Italian troupe. Tonight they're doing *Gazza Ladra*. I have a box close to the front. If madame would allow me to offer it to her—"

"I'm grateful for your offer, sir," interrupted Nelida. "But I'm not going out. I'm very tired."

"An hour of music will relax you," Guermann said. "We'll leave after the first act if you want to go home early."

Nelida made a gesture of reluctant assent. It bothered her to expose herself like this in a theater. All her feminine and romantic sensibilities were offended at the thought of exhibiting her private fate to the public. But an even more exquisite sensitivity silenced her displeasure. She would have preferred that Guermann understand and share her feelings. He didn't seem to fathom them. He took great care in unpacking Nelida's most beautiful gowns from her travel chest, helping her good-naturedly put the finishing touches on her grooming, the minutest details of which he chose and organized. Seeing him so happy, Nelida forgot her reservations. When the time for the performance arrived, she was almost reconciled to the idea of a public appearance.

But her strength nearly failed when, entering Anatole's box, she saw all eyes on her, all opera glasses tilted in her direction, all the women leaning to their neighbors and brazenly pointing her out! Geneva, as is well known, is a city of merchants and Methodists—that is, a city whose sense of economy and devotion denies the most justifiable of pleasures, preferring instead the hypocritically cheap one of gossip. In every country, moreover, two attractive young people who seem happy together arouse the indignation

and fury of a contentious public made up of respectable women tired of their respectability, easy women trying to disguise the looseness of their behavior with the severity of their judgments, old libertines who despise the noble and pure passion of all husbands in similar circumstances—all those, finally, and the number is huge, who resentfully bear the weight of compulsory virtue, the heavy monotonies of domestic life, or the cruel retributions of licentious living!

Anatole had spent part of the day amusing himself with comments about Nelida and Guermann gathered during visits he had made to that end. He now moved busily from box to box listening to new observations caused by their presence at the theater, returning triumphantly half an hour later. To hide herself from view, Nelida had moved back into a corner of the box. She had raised the green taffeta screen; head in hands, she listened to the music.

"My friend," Anatole said to Guermann without Nelida having noticed his arrival, "we three are making a stupendous effect. I'm exploiting you like a gold mine. Questions are by no means lacking. I answer some, leave others dangling. I assume an air of aloof mystery. But ultimately no one's any longer unaware that you're the premier painter of France—which means of the world—that, above and beyond that, you have the mind of a demon, and," he added, lowering his voice a bit, "that the woman who loves you is a great lady of the Faubourg Saint-Germain. All the mothers of children are in turmoil. They can't keep their young daughters out of the conversation. They're ripping you apart but are dying to meet you. Our elegant ladies are already asking me to take them to your atelier. Don't you see? I'm playing hard to get. I'm saying that you don't want to see anyone, that you're perfectly happy keeping to yourself. Which causes even greater curiosity. Tomorrow when I wake up, I'm sure to have thirty invitations not meant for me, I swear it. But I'm a good fellow and will pretend I don't see where all this wheedling is headed. I'll play along. It's

always fun to be fussed over, even when you know it's really directed elsewhere."

Listening to the friendly chatter, Guermann felt his long-repressed vanity begin to stir. He saw in what Anatole was telling him something quite different from provincial gossip. He saw the fulfillment of his dreams: the world in submission to his genius, society in his dominion. Taking his arm to return home, Nelida was surprised to discover him unusually excited. Having heard the end of Anatole's comments, she now recognized the disharmony in their intimacy. She arrived home overwhelmed by a deep sadness. She felt that her solitude had been degraded by insolent looks, her love insulted by hateful words, her sanctuary perhaps soon invaded by a world she had fled, and into whose presence a pitiless twist of fate had suddenly thrust her once again.

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XVIII

The next day Guermann was given a letter from Anatole, which he handed to Nelida after reading it:

> *My dear friend,*
>
> *I don't have time to come by. I'm writing from my work counter to let you know I've accepted a dinner invitation at Madame S__'s with you. I did it without consulting you because you might have refused, and you'd have been wrong. Madame S___ is well known in Geneva. She moves in the highest circles and welcomes all distinguished foreigners. Since you wouldn't mind, you said, doing a few portraits, it's a good idea to get known around town. And nowhere is better than in her home. I'll come by for you before four o'clock.*

"Monsieur Anatole is right," Nelida told Guermann, returning the note whose writing seared her eyes. "You need to go to Madame S___'s. It'll be a nice distraction."

"That's the first harsh word you've said to me, Nelida. Since when does someone as happy as I am need distraction? Unfortunately, Anatole is absolutely right. I have to work, have to make a living. So I have to accept these dreary obligations from a society I need. Will you be bored, Nelida?"

"Me, my friend?" she answered, with angelic gentleness. "Not for an instant. There lies my music, which I haven't yet looked at. This piano is very good. And then, don't I need to organize all the plants we dried at Wallenstadt for

my herbarium? You know I plan to classify the Wallenstadt flora," she added, braving a smile.

At four o'clock, Anatole came for Guermann. Nelida was left alone. True to her word, she opened her piano and tried to sing, but bitterness filled her mouth. Her throat tightened. She went for her plants and began spreading them across the table. Then the memories of the lake, the mountain, the solitude, the overwhelming passion flooded her heart, and huge tears, long held back, trickled down the flowers' withered stems and faded corollas, flowers so recently gathered in immense joy. The effort was too great. She abruptly left the table. Giving up on the idea of forcing herself, she collapsed in her armchair with her head in her hands and began thinking of Guermann. She imagined him entering the home of Madame S___, made up ten conversational scenarios between him and the mistress of the house. But as the moments slipped by, wearied by the futile activity, her mind no longer focused. Soon she could do no more than follow with mounting anxiety the imperceptible movement of the clockface hands and listen in agitation as nearby clocks spoke to one another, chiming the hours slowly, sorrowfully.

Guermann had promised to return at eight o'clock. At five minutes before eight, he rang vigorously at the door. Nelida leaped from her armchair, ran to him, threw her arms around his neck. Again and again he pressed her tightly to his heart, as if he had returned from a long trip. He had, in fact, returned from far away—he had returned from *society*.

After a silence in which the two lovers lavished tender caresses on one another:

"Now, tell me about your long absence," Nelida said, seating Guermann in the armchair and herself, with a child's grace, on his lap.

While she ran her tapered fingers through the thick mass of his hair again and again, he recounted to her the dry, stilted, and pompous conversation of the inner circle to which he had had the honor of being admitted. He sketched the fine and distinctive outlines of the men and women he

had met. Nelida wound up laughing uncontrollably at his biting portrait of a small city's foibles.

"Weren't there any young women?" she asked.

"There were two so-called beauties of the locale," Guermann answered.

And then, taking his pencil and a card, he drew the figure, face, curves, and expressions of these, as he called them, *local ladies*. He had paid attention in painting. Nothing had escaped him. Nelida would have preferred less exactitude, especially when he began making comparisons which, though all in her favor, made an unpleasant impression on her. To compare her to other women was to rank her among them. Nelida would never have imagined comparing Guermann to anyone. For her, the human species was on one side, her lover on the other—alone and incomparable—as is every man loved by a passionate woman whose heart is pure.

Several months went by without dramatic change in the lives of the two lovers. Nelida received answers from her aunt and her friend that broke her heart. It was a cruel and final disappointment that ended by fortifying her courage and making her take even greater, more exclusive refuge in her love.

> *I'm answering, since you seem to desire it, although I can hardly comprehend the value you attach to a letter from me. This is the last time you'll see my handwriting. You're a disgrace to your family. You dishonor it by something far worse than crime: by ridicule. Your husband shows himself to be full of tact. On his return from a trip more than warranted by prior events of which you were doubtless unaware, he told those of his friends with the right to question him that from the beginning you had had hallucinations that degenerated into madness. Besides, he no longer speaks your name and has informed me that he has ordered your funds be regularly deposited with my lawyer, who will get in touch with*

you. There was nothing else for him to do. He couldn't slit his throat over a nobody, someone we all regarded as nearly a servant. I won't tell you to return to your senses. All that's impossible now. Society and your family are closed to you forever. May God have mercy on you. That's your last remaining hope.

—Madame d'Hespel

Hortense's letter was dictated by the same sentiment and written in the same tone.

You're deeply mistaken, poor Nelida, to think that it would be possible for me to maintain the least relationship with you. I'm in a state of despair about it, but what I owe my husband, my concern for my reputation, even my little girl's future, which I must begin thinking about, forbids me from a correspondence that could be interpreted as tacit approval of the scandal you've created. Please know that it's hard for me and that my sincerest wishes go with you. I wish you happiness, but—alas!—without daring to hope for it. Happiness comes here below only with strict observance of the social codes, and you have too mindlessly disregarded them, my dear, unfortunate friend, ever to find peace again.

XIX

Guermann was hard at work on a large painting representing Jean Huss before the Council. He went to his atelier at dawn. Later, Nelida joined him there, spending long hours almost without talking, happy to be near him and follow his work's progress. Still, she was no longer totally absorbed in Guermann's life. Idleness quickly became tiresome. The first philosophical readings she had done with Guermann in Brittany had opened her mind to higher forms of thought. Becoming bolder and stripping girlish scruples away, she was firmly traveling the road to unbiased investigation. Several distinguished men from Geneva whom Guermann met at Madame S___'s home were introduced to Nelida and assisted and encouraged her in her studies. Because she loved truth, she nimbly acquired concepts more precise and disciplined than those of Guermann, who had pored over books solely to find clever arguments that corresponded to his passions or striking paradoxes likely to make him shine in the eyes of his inferiors. Moving methodically, Nelida's intellect became stronger as it grew more elevated. After six months, a noticeable transformation had taken place. Her mind had left its infancy behind. Blind faith had been replaced with thoughtful feeling, Catholic doctrine with a spiritual view of human destiny.

Finally, *Jean Huss* was completed. The city rushed to see it. Guermann was exhilarated by the acclaim. Invitations became more urgent. All the salons wanted him. He let himself be led along and little by little, for one reason or another, he was spending most of his evenings away from

home. It wasn't that he found great pleasure in this new way of living. He had too much taste not to prefer Nelida's more natural, idea-rich conversation to the insolent chatter of affected Genevan women. But he was pleased to see the influence he had in this pretentious society and persuaded himself that, in Nelida's interest, he wanted to surround her with respect and needed to make a brilliant reputation for himself, not only as an artist but also as a man of the world. Besides, more seriously occupied with every passing day, Nelida didn't seem to suffer from his absences and showed no visible displeasure.

At the height of this social dissipation, Guermann received a letter from Paris, written by a friend to whom he had sent his painting and who was entrusted with managing his interests:

> *I had thought it might be fine for you to send your* Jean Huss *without coming yourself. That was a mistake. Through a strange coincidence that we won't try to hide—perhaps your glory or your loss—D___ is showing his* Savonarola. *Comparisons are inevitable. All of D___'s students are out and about praising him to the clouds while they disparage you. The abduction of Madame de Kervaens and your long absence have seriously hurt you. People are saying and repeating to others that your art no longer touches their hearts. I've polled several art critics. The entire press will be hostile to you if you don't come back as quickly as possible and try to win back lost ground and regain the influence that your sympathetic word and the superiority of your mind will always give you.*

Reading this letter, the artist shuddered. The idea of such a defeat was no longer bearable to his exalted sense of self-love. He returned home, somber and curt, and declared to Nelida that he was leaving that very evening. His fierce manner and sharp tone fooled her. She thought he was in despair over leaving Geneva, and so she feigned complete

detachment in order not to undermine a considered decision that seemed to have cost him enormously. Guermann didn't expect to find her this way. He felt greatly relieved and climbed in the carriage without sadness, without guilt, full of wounded pride, dreaming of nothing but success, triumph, revenge. His glory threatened, the artist was no longer sensitive to others' pain. In his vainglorious soul, an instant sufficed to dry up the long-tended spring of love.

Guermann to Nelida

Charm of my life, here I am far away from you! It had to be! It was a necessity for us both—for you even more than me. Without that, how could I have pulled away from your arms, oh my beloved! But it was an imperial duty. The whole world, Nelida, must know the man you've chosen and what he is. It's time, oh my Beatrice, for your love to be glorified on the face of the earth as it is in the depths of my heart.

It was time for me to come back to Paris. My rivals had made the most of my absence. New enemies brought on by my happiness have helped them. They've spread a thousand damaging rumors that have gained currency: I've given up painting; I, dull herdsman, was living at my shepherdess's feet; my talent was gone, my genius wiped out. Jean Huss *will answer them. I know from a good source that it was greeted with cheers by the jury. The salons are stirred up over my return. They're wondering in several places whether to invite me. But I'm quite calm. You know what success in Paris is like. Success justifies everything. Mine will be huge. Journalists are already all around me and seem finally to understand that I have a greater future than the sorry talents they're hot to applaud.*

The salon opens in two weeks. Savonarola, *they say, has brilliant color but is weak—very weak—in design and composition. That couldn't be otherwise, and my*

friends, since my return, are beginning to say so with confidence, whereas with me gone, they meekly hang their heads. Friends! Friends! How I feel more strongly every day the worth of the noble and proud courage that made you follow me through flames. Nelida—be blessed, honored, cherished among women! I am simply silence and prayer before you.

Anatole to Guermann

You asked me to give you news of Madame de Kervaens. I can't hide it from you, my friend. Since you left she has visibly changed. She doesn't complain, she tries to smile, but it's obvious she's suffering. When the mail is delivered, her fever clearly comes on. I'm often there and see her turn pale, then flush when she reads your letters. When none comes, she slips into daydreams nothing can dispel. It's only after enormous effort that we can get her to go out. I say we because R___ and P___ are extremely diligent. The latter, especially, who, not finding a woman worthy of his attentions in Geneva, has shown exceptional regard for Madame de Kervaens. He speaks of her at every opportunity and, if he weren't one of your staunchest allies, I would say he has designs on her. Come back as soon as possible. Madame de Kervaens adores you, and I believe she's a woman who can die of love.

Guermann to Anatole

No one dies of love, good friend, and I'm not conceited enough to presume Madame de Kervaens is as miserable as you say. She coughs because it's cold in Geneva. My return won't make the wind stop. It's clear that she's being courted. She's beautiful, witty. Through her devotion to me, she has acquired a kind of celebrity that attracts others. I'm not jealous, and I would never take on the silly and repugnant task of being her jailer. I

cannot leave Paris yet. The salon opens tomorrow. It would look as though I'm running away from the fight. But in ten days or a couple of weeks, unless something new comes up, I'll leave for Geneva. Good-bye. Thank you for your devoted care; I embrace you warmly.

Anatole to Guermann

I write in haste, dear friend, and in great distress. Come back immediately. Serious things have happened here. Madame de Kervaens is in bed, extremely ill following a violent shock that, if you don't rush back, could have dire consequences. Come—your honor depends on it. Here's what happened. Day before yesterday, seeing her even more gloomy and in pain, I insisted so much that she promised me she'd go out on foot a bit. I wasn't free. P___ offered to accompany her. You know how unpopular he is in Geneva. He's haughty with a reputation for belligerence that makes him despised. More than likely, proud of appearing in public with Madame de Kervaens, he took on airs even more intolerable than usual. The fact remains that, as he was passing near a group of young men of the city, one of them yelled an insult in a very loud voice aimed at him and at her. Unable to leave her just then, he had to content himself with throwing his card down in the middle of the group and making a pointed gesture.

Madame de Kervaens heard everything. She made him take her back home in a state you can well imagine, begging P___ to promise he wouldn't follow through with any action. Then, having called me, she begged that I use every possible means to prevent the conflict. That was impossible. P___ and young S___ were simply after a scandal. The encounter took place this morning. P___ was only grazed, but Madame de Kervaens has been deeply hurt. The duel has compromised her in the

most devastating way. Salon gossip is idiotic. They say you're abandoning her, that she's consoling herself with P___, etc., etc.

In heaven's name, come back without wasting a minute.

For Guermann this letter was a thunderbolt. There was nothing else to do—he had to leave. To leave at the very moment of his triumph, at the moment when every eye in Paris was focused on him, and to do so in order to pick up on a silly business, a sick woman, reprimands that would be at least implied, tiresome gossip. For the first time, he felt a *restriction* on his life. This woman who had been the bright light, the driving force, the luminous center of his life was becoming an obstacle, a *duty*. And duty was a sentiment repugnant to Guermann. The long highway was unspeakable. A concentrated irritation gnawed at him. He arrived in Geneva with a heart more full of rage than love. Seeing Nelida again, however, her cheeks hollow, her eyes listless, her lips pale, still beautiful with a transcendent majesty even in suffering, his foul disposition was overwhelmed. He fell at her feet, pressed her to him with more ardor than on the first day, and made her forget in ecstasy all she had suffered in the cruelty of his absence.

The doctor advised a milder climate. Tired of Geneva and finding himself, through the sale of his painting, in a situation to handle the expenses of a trip, Guermann suggested they pass through Simplon and set up residence in Milan. Nelida accepted on condition that there, at least, she would see absolutely no one and live in complete seclusion. Guermann promised her everything she desired.

Guermann had taken with him a letter of credit to a Milan banker who, on his arrival, invited him to a ball where he was introduced to all of high society. Despite the pose he had formerly adopted of being proud of his poverty, this artist of the people was more dazzled by the grand surfaces of aristocratic life than he might have wished to admit to himself. Several times while telling Nelida (who had not agreed to follow him in these circles) some story about a party he had attended without her, he grew excited, praising with such childish delight the brilliance and extravagance of Italian palaces, the abundance of the dinners, the luxury of the duchesses, that Nelida, taken aback, began quietly to wonder if this were the same man she had heard judge the pleasures of the age with such austere rigidity, who had so simply and proudly torn her from a comparable magnificence to lead her into poverty and solitude. She didn't share her private reflections with Guermann, but the minimal interest to her of these conversations—full of things she wanted no part of—often betrayed itself in her distracted response. The artist saw this distraction as more intentional than it was. Assuming it to be a protest against his social life, he thought he needed to intensify his efforts to make Nelida accompany him. He was surprised to discover a firmness in her refusal that he was unaccustomed to seeing. His vanity was hurt. He insisted on his point. In the very lively discussion that followed, he let himself go so far as to tell Nelida that she would do him a grave injustice if she refused to take part in social contacts that Italian custom made simple,

contacts that would place both of them in a far more advantageous position for his interests and his fame. Contrary to his expectations, Nelida didn't give in to this line of reasoning. She answered very gently but with the resolve of someone who has thought carefully and made an unalterable decision: "I couldn't believe, my friend," she told him, "that my presence in a few salons, where I'd be merely tolerated, might add much to your personal aura. I'd be a continual subject of concern and anxiety for you. The least hint of coldness in the greeting of some *grande dame* or other would cause you mortal pain or an annoyance that might provoke a dreadful scene. At the very least, you'd lose your peace of mind and with it the advantages of this social interplay. As for me, Guermann—I who left country, family, and native society of my own free will—how and why would I try to slip timidly into a world alien to me, where I'd never be admitted—you've said so yourself—except in deference to some sort of tolerance that put me, in a sense, on the level with and in the company of women who have neither morals nor honor? No, my friend. Always do what you deem appropriate for yourself. Since you believe your glory and the flowering of your genius come at the cost of these sacrifices, make them boldly and without concern for me. Solitude is good for me; I cherish it. As long as I see you coming home with love, I won't ever complain about your having left solitude behind."

The refusal was too fundamentally reasonable, too gently expressed for Guermann to dare show offense. But he was piqued by the moral high ground Nelida assumed. The superiority became more obvious by the day and more unbearable to him. As has been noted, Nelida was seriously interested in study. The profound seclusion of her life in Milan, while favoring her penchant for meditation, succeeded in giving her a solidity and vitality of mind rare in a woman, rare most of all in poetic imaginations, who so willingly rock themselves in clouds, coming back to reality only with serious effort. Guermann, in contrast, who had imperceptibly

taken on the world's ways, got up late after wearisome late-night vigils, his mind clouded by the myriad trivialities that comprise salon life. He hadn't yet been able to consider beginning an important work. To compose such a work of art as he was capable of doing requires contemplation—totally contrary to the preoccupations of his new life. His mind and especially his good looks having put him very quickly in vogue among the marvelous Milanese beauties, commissions for portraits came one after the other without interruption. This easy, lucrative work suited his current state of mind and served him as a direct and dramatic means of maintaining his image. It soon became indispensable to him to have a carriage and horses in order to arrive in immaculate dress at the home of his elegant models. He also didn't want to seem inferior to the young sons of families who handed him his cash advances, so he gave dinners the whole city spoke of enthusiastically. His vanity swelled. As his expenses increased, he was obliged to work faster. He felt no need for study, since he no longer thought about serious work, above all since the frivolous conversation of his companions in pleasure furnished him with easy opportunities to sparkle and dominate. One day, in a discussion between him and Nelida about a book she had thoroughly studied and he had only partially skimmed, he was bested and reduced to silence. From that moment on, whatever interest he had formerly had in talking with her vanished. He saw that his paradoxes had lost their power over a mind fed on more substantial food. He saw that he no longer made an *impression*. From then on, he carefully avoided every serious conversation, and the disagreements between the two increased.

"Guess who I met this evening at La Scala, who was introduced to me, and who asked me to do her portrait?" Guermann asked Nelida, who turned pale, suddenly struck with a strange foreboding. "The Marquise Zepponi."

At the name, Madame de Kervaens felt as if a snake slid into her breast and wrapped itself around her heart.

"And quite pretty, indeed," Guermann went on. "So pretty that your husband might be forgiven for leaving every other woman but you, Nelida."

The airiness of this comment repulsed Nelida.

"You refused?" she said in an altered voice.

"Refused? Of course not. Why would I have refused?"

"Because I don't want you going to that woman's house!" Nelida exclaimed, rising impulsively and looking at Guermann with eyes that he saw, for the first time, shine with anger. "Because I've earned the right, perhaps, to demand a sacrifice of my own."

And then, not waiting for an answer, racked by a suffering sharper than her will, throwing all prudence and reserve aside, Nelida released the flood of bitterness held in check by her pride and strength. She created for her lover a moving portrait of the grief, anguish, remorse, and despair that had become her life from the day this foreigner had stolen her husband—from the moment, in particular, that Guermann, abusing her open-hearted trust, had drawn her onto a fateful path.

It seemed as though the demon of revenge possessed her. A bitter eloquence flowed from her usually reticent lips. Weary resignation surrendered its grip on her soul. The truth was finally out.

She was tall and beautiful in her exasperation. Indignation gave her pale cheeks a deep flush. Her eyes flashed lightning. Her voice trembled, her movements had suddenly taken on a singular authority. Guermann looked at her admiringly. Less touched by the deep sense of her words than, like an artist, struck by the new beauty before him, he remained silent for a while, contemplating her. Then in his turn carried away by the only excitement he was capable of feeling:

"You're sublime like this, Nelida!" he exclaimed. "Even the diva Malibran was never so spectacular!"

These words cut Nelida to the quick. She suddenly stood still, staring at Guermann with a look that held all the

force of her pain and reproach, sat down in silence, picked up some embroidery she had left on the table, and intently resumed the delicate arabesques on the transparent muslin. Finding no other appropriate way of renewing the conversation, Guermann picked up, then one after the other put back, several music books that lay open on the piano. Then he slowly made his way to the door, hoping Nelida would call him back. She didn't lift her head. He went out. From this moment, not only was there unacknowledged dissension between them, but an assumption of hostility they both recognized. A seed of hate was planted in their love.

The next day Guermann went to the marquise's home. Nelida didn't ask questions. The name *Elisa* was no longer spoken. By tacit agreement, they avoided whatever might even remotely bring her into the discussion. Once the portrait was begun, Guermann regularly spent three or four hours a day at the Zepponi palace. He gave himself, to be honest, the strict task of spending every evening close to Nelida. But this duty, though self-imposed, weighed on his disposition, which chafed at any restraint. Since Nelida had declined to see anyone, these private moments were never interrupted. The conversation lacked nourishment. Guermann felt it would be ungracious of him to talk about his social life. He suggested readings. He did them without enthusiasm. She listened without pleasure. Day by day he became more concerned, she more withdrawn. They had come to that sad moment in despotic love, which wants to be exclusive and solitary, when destiny, that gives nothing permanent to humans, ironically begins withdrawing the very strength that had allowed their brief triumph and that had seemed likely to make them invulnerable.

One morning, Nelida was handed a letter whose seal and handwriting she didn't recognize. She was astonished because, after the responses she had received from her aunt and her friend, she'd written no one else. Sadness brings defiance. She dreaded some new misfortune and spent several minutes, her eyes fixed on the fine characters of the

letter she'd opened, unable either to make herself read it or even look at the signature.

Do you remember me? Has your memory kept the name of poor Claudine? I don't even dare hope so. Noble souls like yours always remember good deeds done for them but don't lower themselves to remember the kindnesses they lavish on others. However, I choose to believe that my presence won't be unwelcome and that the sight of a happiness you've created, of a peaceful and sweet life owing itself to you, will bring you no trace of displeasure. In a few days, I'll be near you. Nelida, your adopted child, your mercy-child will tell you everything about the love she's felt for you and held inside during these long years of absence. But my heart is running away with me. Let me tell you briefly what's become of me since we left one another and how it happens that I'm on my way to where you live.

Immediately after you left the convent, I fell into deep depression. Everything inside those walls where you no longer were became odious to me. I thought of nothing but you, I spoke of no one but you, I prayed for no one but you. My parents, gone for three months, came to see me. They were surprised over the progress in my studies and even more surprised over my grief, which signaled an intensity I was supposed to be incapable of feeling. I implored them to take me home. Delighted, they agreed. I spent two years in their region in Touraine—gentle, submissive, working hard on my studies. My mother thought she might be able to marry me off, but the illusion was short-lived. My reputation as retarded had preceded me. Nothing could blot it out. The province, because it's idle, is malicious. People were jealous of my fortune, and it was quickly established on principle that an upright man couldn't possibly expose himself to the risk of having retarded children. A proposal that had gone quite far along was broken off due to a

public protest. My mother was in despair when a happy circumstance led a young merchant to Tours who had recently been able to help my father in an important way. He was hired to work for us. My parents confided their concerns about me to him. He then stated that in ordinary circumstances he would have never dared aspire to my hand, but, given the situation, he thought he might be able to offer me a considerable fortune and a respected name. My mother hesitated, but my father had no prejudices. He told him it was necessary only that they be assured this marriage was acceptable to me. I accepted ecstatically. The thought of familial happiness, of children to bring up, to cherish, had often made me weep. I began to fear eternal isolation. I've been married for three years and am the happiest of women. We have a son we idolize. But all this happiness hasn't kept me from thinking of you, Nelida. I spoke often with Monsieur Bernard—that's my husband's name—about what you were for me. I wanted to write you. He dissuaded me, pointing out I was no longer in a position allowing me to seek a great lady's friendship. But when we learned of your flight from Kervaens: "Poor woman," he exclaimed in a tone that went straight to my heart, "she's racing to her own destruction. Unhappiness and abandonment are inevitable. She's going to need us, Claudine, and then, I swear to you, she'll find two friends instead of one. Let's try to find out what's happened to her." Forgive me, Nelida, for touching such intimate and painful things. Hearsay has it that you're not happy. We were on the point of leaving for Naples where my husband wants to tie up some business arrangements. We need to be in Marseilles to board ship. "Let's go by Geneva," he told me one day. "Who knows? Maybe we can offer her some help." Here we are in Geneva and find you no longer here. We're told you're in Lombardy. My husband, expected in Naples on a specific date, is offering to accompany me to Milan, and, if you're still

there, will leave me there with a valet in whom he has complete confidence. I've accepted, and we leave in three hours. Oh, Nelida, Nelida—may God protect and guide me to you, even if I die of joy when I embrace you!

Nelida was deeply touched by this letter that brought back the happiest days—the only completely happy days—of her life. She couldn't help making cruel comparisons that brought regret to her heart. Claudine—the poor backward child, neglected, forgotten Claudine, to whom she had never given a sign of remembrance, about whom she had never thought, either in her joy or pain—was coming to her to throw herself in her arms when everyone else was abandoning her. She—the timid child, the humble member of the middle class—she had courage and faithfulness. She was going to brave public opinion and show herself to be as unafraid in disinterested feeling as Nelida had been in the throes of passion. Not one word of this letter betrayed strain or took sides. Everything in it was simple and true, everything noble by force of its goodness. Whereas the friend of prosperous times, the guilty and forgiven friend who was given an unexpected opportunity to wash away her wrong at the cost of a few kind words, the friend she had contacted on an impulse of magnanimous trust, that friend had shamefully denied her and gone on her way without regret, without a tear.

"Oh, Claudine," Nelida said to herself, "it's easy to see you're not of this world. The world pushed the poor madwoman aside. Madwoman, indeed—" she continued bitterly, "because she dares come near those who suffer. She dares hold her hand out to those the world shuns. She dares love those whose friendship holds no social advantage."

And Nelida, who for a long time no longer wept, because suffering had burned and dried up the source of her tears, felt her eyelids moisten. She was almost afraid of her tenderness and decided not to confide her sorrow to Claudine.

That same evening, the two friends were in each other's arms. Claudine was no longer the same woman. Happiness had made her almost beautiful. An angelic sweetness harmonized her irregular features. Her gaze still held the slowness and uncertainty of a mind that doubts itself, but it sometimes had a delightful expression of tenderness and joy. Her figure had developed superbly, and her flesh had maintained the velvety freshness of early youth. There was an ineffable charm about her that emanated from a pure heart and a mind spared the knowledge of evil. Several days went by in conversations endlessly beginning and breaking off. Nelida asked about her former acquaintances at the convent. She wanted to know specifically about the Mother Superior.

"Alas!" Claudine told her, "the most devastating rumors were circulating in the boarding school the last time I went there. They said, but I can't believe it, that our holy mother had broken her vows, left the cloister—that she threw herself into all sort of political intrigues. They talked about secret societies, republican plots. It broke my heart to hear a person I revere ripped apart that way."

The news didn't surprise Nelida as much as it had sweet Claudine. Nelida had often suspected a storm brewing in Mother Saint Elizabeth's life. Certain sensibilities carry one another's secrets by instinct. Passionate souls know each other, even in the silence and circumspection of the cloister.

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XXI

"I'm deeply grateful, madame," Guermann told Claudine the first time they were alone together, "for all the good you're doing Madame de Kervaens. Your coming here is a gift from heaven. Nelida and I very much needed a mediating presence, and you're the only person acceptable to her. Let me say without the least conceit—besides, you've been able to see for yourself—Madame de Kervaens is obsessed by a single preoccupation. Her over-exclusive love is devouring her. In addition to that, her earlier wounds have been reopened by her constant reflection and her unending solitude. My hands are too rough to bind wounds like that. I don't know what kind of misunderstanding has come between us. It threatens to keep growing. And, to speak plainly, I think an absence, a separation, however short, is needed just now to renew the confidence and openness we lost, even though there's never been—I'm sure of it—anyone to be blamed for it. If you could convince Madame de Kervaens to take a short trip with you, to change her way of thinking, she'd certainly benefit, and then we could put an end—with no upheavals or painful explanations—to a terribly distressing situation for her and for me."

Delighted, Claudine found Guermann's suggestion reasonable. She didn't know that when reason comes so late to extreme situations it doesn't heal the wrong at all. Instead, it sounds its depths. Nelida readily agreed to a trip to Florence. Guermann promised to join her as soon as he finished a portrait begun some time earlier. The two friends set out in Claudine's carriage. The artist accompanied them

to the first relay and, it must be said, felt an unusual sense of well being on his return alone to Milan, seeing himself free, delivered—at least for a few days—from a highly irritating context: a deep pain that neither complains nor accepts consolation and whose source is one's own error.

For several days he'd been unhappy. The portrait of Marquise Zepponi *was not going well*. He blamed the lack of success in his work—his brush's tendency to *hold back*—on the heavy air he breathed at home and on the deep concern—no matter how angry it made him—into which Nelida's proud silence threw him. He returned that same day to the marquise's home. She seemed to him illuminated in a new way. He ripped his canvas apart and immediately started another sketch whose boldness, whose movement and truth, fully satisfied him. Almost a week went by. The letters he received from Florence were good. Nelida was enjoying visits to the galleries, the churches, the thousand masterpieces of Tuscan art. Almost daily she sent him a kind of journal in which she haphazardly jotted her spontaneous impressions. More often than not these pages, written with all the abandon of a mind in dialogue with itself, showed a high degree of refinement and a clear sense of taste. Occasionally, overcome by enthusiasm, they were remarkably eloquent. Reading them, Guermann felt both pride and humiliation. The woman who felt, thought, and wrote this way belonged to him. That made him proud. But when he searched his soul, he realized that he, the artist, was incapable of expressing with such precision so quick and sure an evaluation. Such awareness of his inferiority caused deep turmoil.

Elisa's portrait moved forward rapidly. Every day, without complaining of the least fatigue, she gave Guermann sittings that lasted between five and six hours. He was smitten with his work, she with him: From there an ambiguity arose that he didn't notice but that threw the marquise into endless bewilderment.

Two days before the artist was to join Nelida, there was, on the occasion of a young archduke's marriage, a masked

ball at La Scala. Monsieur Negri, the banker with whom Guermann had an account, invited him to his box. As Guermann entered, the spectacle dazzled his eyes. The huge room was splendidly lighted by a chandelier of colossal proportions and by candelabra placed at regular intervals among the five levels of boxes. The ground floor, raised to theater-level, streamed with colorful masks and hooded cloaks that crisscrossed one another in all directions to the sounds of a mighty orchestra. People were bumping into each other, greeting each other, heckling each other, swearing at each other—all for the diversion of the box seats, where women, in elegant formal dress sparkling with diamonds, covered with flowers, were paid homage by a fawning court. Everywhere eyes glistening with pleasure, shoulders bare, lovely arms leaning against silk cushions, ruby and emerald necklaces cascading over ivory necks, agitated fans by turns covering and uncovering flirtatious smiles, languorous poses, bouquets plucked clean of their blooms, looks exchanged suddenly and brilliantly as lightning, a comingled murmur like the hum of a beehive, here and there a cry issuing from the crowd, some huge burst of laughter making heads lean out of every box—in a word, an ineffable assemblage of movement, light, color, music, and noise—a kind of universal vertigo at whose heart pleasure and license held full sway.

"Well, what do you say?" exclaimed Monsieur Negri, who saw Guermann's astonishment with a certain national pride. "Isn't it an amazing sight? Long live Milan—where carnivals entertain us! Our ladies aren't prudish, and—especially for a good-looking foreigner like yourself—there's nothing they wouldn't do. Do you know that for some time now you've been the only one watched in the whole procession? In your place I'd take advantage of the situation. You'll see here tonight all our prettiest women. Say, over there, at the front of the house, is Duchess Lina and her lover Count de Pemberg; there's Giuseppina Toldi with her sister Caroline; over there, in number twenty-two, is Marquise

Merini with Berthold; he's just left La Rughetta—who's dying of jealousy—for her; now look at number four—those pale cheeks and red eyes! But wherever is Marquise Zepponi? She's Sicilian but more beautiful than any of our Milanese beauties. Ah! here she comes with her *cavalier servente*."

A valet in full livery was drawing the curtains of the box opposite Monsieur Negri's. Elisa, wrapped in an ermine coat, sat on the armchair to the right. A young man followed her. He handed her opera glasses to her, which she took without paying him the least attention. Letting her coat fall back, she surveyed the room at a glance. When she came to the banker's box, he greeted her with a deep bow, to which she responded with an anxious and passionate look directed at Guermann. For the first time time, the look disturbed him. Through one of those inexplicable oddities of the heart, *he felt* what he had only *seen* before: Marquise Zepponi was incredibly beautiful.

Monsieur Negri suggested he take a walk around the room. The artist was almost instantly invited to dine by several young men and so followed them to their box. After dinner, they went to the foyer together, where intrigues developed and affairs began. His companions were almost immediately hailed and successively called away by hooded cloaks. He found himself alone, tired of the noise, a little disoriented by the wine smells and the vapors of the suffocating air. His mind was vexed by a thousand images, a thousand confused sensations. He was about to leave the ball when a woman's arm slipped through his. A voice disguised behind its mask that nevertheless made him start said in French:

"I need to talk to you. Come."

Guermann let himself be led by this arm that, gently hurrying him, guided him through the densest part of the crowd with admirable skill. When they arrived at a place in the corridor with no crowd, where a few people occasionally walked by and where they might talk without being overheard:

"They say you're leaving," said the mask. "Do nothing. You mustn't leave, do you understand?"

"And what will you do, lovely mask, to stop me?" Guerman asked with a smile.

"Whatever's necessary, whatever you wish—if you're capable of love, discretion, prudence."

"Prudence?" asked Guermann, trying to give a pleasant twist to the conversation so oddly initiated by the hooded cloak: "Prudence? I'm twenty-three years old. Discretion? I'm French. Love? I'm leaving precisely because I am in love."

The hooded cloak let go of his arm. There was a moment of silence. Then, grabbing it again forcefully:

"You want to leave because you're in love with a woman, and you'll stay because you'll soon be in love with another one."

These words were spoken in a strange tone.

"You rely strongly on your beautiful eyes, charming mask," replied Guermann, affecting a laugh although he felt rather powerfully moved. "In fact, though I can see them only imperfectly, they seem to me the most beautiful in the world."

"I'm counting on my love," answered the hooded cloak fiercely. "I'm counting on a premonition that tells me your hand will squeeze mine like this (and she squeezed his hand passionately), that your lips will tell me the way I'm telling you now, the way that can't deceive: I love you."

The hooded cloak began to walk quickly away, glancing back often to see if he was following. It climbed to the fifth set of galleries, abruptly opened a box, ushered Guermann inside, came in after him, and closed the bolted door. All of this in a few seconds' time. The box curtains were drawn. A little lamp glowed palely.

"You don't know who I am," the stranger told Guermann, taking his hand. "You may never know. What difference does it make? I'm a young and beautiful woman

who loves you madly. I won't tell you where or when I saw you. But I will tell you that from the first moment you appeared before me I felt irresistibly attracted to you. I even believed, in my wild frenzy, that this attraction had to be shared, that you had to want my love the way I wanted yours—at whatever price. But *you* are French. You don't know, the way we do, these sudden, overwhelming passions, these burning desires we die for!"

"I've told you, madame," interrupted Guermann who, even in the state of excitement into which this capricious evening had thrown him, held on to the wish to escape the type of affair common to masked balls. "I'm cold and curt, like all Frenchmen, and what's even worse, as in love as it's possible for me to be."

"You're making fun of me," the hooded cloak said, pulling away the hand he had until then held in his. "The violent and irrational emotion that pushed me to you inspires nothing but your scorn. I should have expected that. Very well, everything has been said. I have no more reason to hide from your sight. Know the woman who dared love you first and tell you in a wild moment of distraction. Make fun of me, insult me, brand me with hideous names. They'll still be sweet because they fall from your lips. Heap your ridicule on me. Laugh—not just at my passion but at my person. Look on the face of someone who won't be here tomorrow. Look at her with that icy, annihilating look: I am Elisa Zepponi!"

Elisa threw back her hood. Her mask fell loose. Her impetuous gesture pulled out the golden arrow holding her hair, whose black waves fell to the floor. Her cheeks were as pale as marble. Her eyes sparkled in the darkness. Her lips moved convulsively. Exhausted by the effort she had just made, she fell motionless at Guermann's knees.

A soft knock at the door made her leap up. Guermann rushed to stop anyone from entering.

"It's nothing," Elisa said, suddenly calm and back in her chair. "I'd forgotten—it's my maid letting me know it's time to go home. As a matter of fact," she added, putting

her mask back on and peering cautiously through the box curtain, "everyone's leaving La Scala. It must be nearly morning—. Forget me."

"Never!" Guermann exclaimed without fully realizing what he was saying.

"Well, then—tomorrow," Elisa said with a calmness that contrasted starkly with what had just happened.

She signaled to Guermann that he shouldn't follow.

The artist returned home in a state of turmoil bordering on drunkenness. He threw himself fully dressed on his bed and fell into a deep sleep. When he woke up it was late. Full daylight was shining on his room's disorder. The hotel valet had very likely come in because the fire was burning and he found letters from Florence on the table. At the sight of Nelida's handwriting, he felt a painful emotion almost like guilt that made him shift abruptly to a more prudent and loyal sentiment than might have been expected. He resolved not to see the marquise and immediately leave for Florence. Without thinking further he began to pack. Looking in Nelida's room for a music book she had begged him to bring, he opened the desk where she usually did her writing and saw in front a book in black Moroccan leather that he had sometimes seen in her hands but that she had always closed quickly when he approached. Guermann wasn't curious, but an irresistible temptation to leaf through this mysterious book overcame him. A great many pages were torn out. Others, half erased, containing no more than a name, a date, a wish to God. The artist's mind wasn't calm enough to look for the meaning of these disconnected fragments. But his eyes fell on a completely filled sheet, written with still-fresh ink, and he read it from beginning to end in feverish haste.

> *Oh, my grief, be grand and calm. Hollow out a bed in my soul so deep that no one, not even he, can hear you moan. Do your work in silence. Carry my love with you far from the shores where hope blooms. I can no longer*

hold up against your bitter waves. Stop, then, your foaming and roaring. Oh, my grief, be grand and calm!

Oh, my anger, be proud and generous. Set my heart on fire and consume it, but unfold yourself in words no more. Stay hidden, even from God, because you are so just, oh my anger, that God might answer you, and then you would be vanquished, you would cease to be. And I want you as immortal as the love that gave you birth. Oh, my anger, be proud and generous!

Oh, my pride, close my lips forever. Seal my soul with a triple seal. What I have said, no one has understood. What I have felt, no one has guessed. The one I loved has penetrated only the surface of my love. It is you alone I trust. Oh, my pride, close my lips forever!

Oh, my wisdom, do not try consoling me. Vainly you try to make me unfaithful to my despair. I know it descends to regions where nothing ever finishes. In its dark beauty, it invites my soul to a perpetual wedding feast. Nothing must break the band that joins us. Oh, my wisdom, do not try consoling me!

Reading this, Guermann seethed. All his good intentions disappeared. His selfish nature once more prevailed. Anger and rage took hold. His hands clenched in fury. His pride had just been dealt a mortal blow. He saw himself analyzed, understood, judged by a pride greater than his own, by a mind whose strength he had not suspected. The woman who was his slave had freed herself, and if she still agreed to wear his chains, it was no longer in blindness but in awareness. It was no longer in order to stay faithful to him but to stay faithful to herself. The thought infuriated him. He rang, asking for a carriage immediately. Hurrying as if fearful of being held back, he thundered to the coachman: "*Strada del corso—Palazzo Zepponi!*"

XXII

Nelida was, in fact, no longer the sweetly submissive woman led by her dreams—unaware of life, unaware of self—whom we saw unwittingly take every road open to her. She had undergone the great test of human destiny—the test that destroys faint hearts, degrades ordinary souls but initiates those of genuine worth into wisdom. She had faltered. Individuals who haven't felt, at least once in life, the extremes of their own nature and the fragility of their being do not fully comprehend true justice or goodness. Inside every fault acknowledged and shouldered with courage is the seed of heroism. That seed was in Nelida's soul, had been growing there a year. With consciousness of its hopeless devotion and wasted sacrifice, its strength increased daily.

The lines Guermann had just read with such indignation were a visceral cry—the firm, unwavering decision to suffer quietly and endure to the end, without hope or complaint, the painful martyrdom for a truth she had recognized too late. She had left for Florence with a thought similar to the one of her lover. She too wanted to put a space, a kind of stopped time, between the illusion, doubt, enthusiasm, and despair of the past two years and the calm, steady acceptance of an unhappiness explored to its depths. She had finally seen Guermann's soul clearly. She no longer felt he was worthy enough to have justified the wrong she'd done. From that moment on, she expected nothing more from the future.

Seeing her calm, busy, and serene of disposition, Claudine misinterpreted the signs. When her husband joined

them in Florence, she wanted them to celebrate the happy outcome of her care. He dared not disillusion her, but a single glance at Nelida's feverish, drawn face told him otherwise and made him anticipate little good from this apparent resignation. Day after day they waited for Guermann. He didn't come. No letter arrived. Claudine began to worry, but she feigned assurance, inventing a host of absurd excuses for such an incomprehensible silence and believing Nelida accepted them in good faith because she didn't bother to contradict them. Monsieur Bernard, who offered his arm to Nelida during the art excursions they made daily, sensed that she walked with greater difficulty almost by the hour as she struggled more for breath and spoke more unsteadily and with greater agitation. He feared the continuation of this uncertainty and was looking for a plausible excuse to go to Milan when one morning he was given a package and letter mailed from Munich and addressed to Madame de Kervaens. His heart clutched as he handed them to her. In contrast to his usual discreet behavior, he stayed close by as she read. His anxiety lasted a long time. Nelida seemed to have enormous difficulty reading a handwriting she knew well; and the letter was hopelessly long.

"Don't leave me, monsieur!" Nelida finally cried out, looking at him distractedly and grabbing his hand. "Don't leave me for a minute, because I think I'm going mad!"

And she handed him the letter she had just read.

"Read! Read!" she continued. "Read quickly and tell me I'm wrong. He wasn't the one who wrote that, was he?"

While Monsieur Bernard read in his turn, Nelida, her eyes riveted on his, still tightly squeezing his hand, seemed to be waiting for his first look or word as if for a life or death sentence.

Five minutes went by.

"There's only one thing to do, madame—" this cool-headed, decent man said, standing up and forcing Nelida to stand with him, "only one thing in keeping with your own self-respect. Leave Italy. Go back to France. Go to the

countryside with Claudine. Decide nothing right now. Be satisfied to live and wait. Expect everything with time, everything of yourself. You're one of those noble creatures who cannot perish in misery. You mustn't let yourself be destroyed by the dark force that ruled you too long, by a passion unworthy—"

"Not another word," Nelida said. "Living or dying doesn't matter. You're telling the truth. I need to see my country again. I need forgiveness in that world before I face another."

Here's what Guermann Regnier wrote Nelida de Kervaens two years after having swept her away with him:

> *There's a **pain greater** but less **calm** than yours, madame, and it's mine, at no longer finding in your heart any of the feelings my heart requires.*
>
> *There's a more legitimate **anger**, which is ignited by the vile condemnation you bring to bear on my life.*
>
> *There's a **pride** that will speak to you but once more, because you've mortally wounded it. It's the pride of a man you don't know because your cowering soul and timid mind can grasp nothing but rote existence that follows the small-minded dimensions of ordinary behavior.*
>
> *There's a **wisdom** telling me that we can no longer understand one another, and that we should separate until your eyes open to a new light—that it's not up to me to make you see.*
>
> *Your stubborn silence, your irritating objection to my life for more than a year have damaged me perhaps irreparably unless I quickly escape its fatal influence. Don't interpret this as a final communication. I'm leaving Milan; I'm momentarily withdrawing from the destructive effect you have on my mind. But my devotion remains with you. In whatever place I go, wherever you are, if you need me, let me know, and I'll rush to your side. But above all I have to salvage the artist in me.*

The fire that sparked my genius must burn again. It will perish in the atmosphere you're trying to make me breathe.

I'm leaving for T___. The Grand Duke I met at Milan who wants to build a museum has commissioned me to paint a fresco on the vaulted gallery built on designs by Germany's premier architect. This glorious work will show friends and enemies alike what I'm capable of doing. They think I've faded. They're convinced, and I know you are too, that because I don't live like an anchorite and because, for some time, I've done only lesser works, that I've grown incapable of great things. In two years my answer to my detractors, my answer to your unfairness will be indelibly drawn on the walls of a splendid palace.

Farewell, madame! You're with devoted friends. I assume they'll stay close and help you get properly situated, either in Florence or in Naples—which you wanted to see and whose climate seems to me best for your health. Nothing prevents you from now resuming a way of life consistent with your status and fortune. When my first work is done, in about six months, I'll join you wherever you are and we can, perhaps, from that moment begin anew this two-way existence with which I would still have been happy had you not so utterly poisoned it.

If not—. But I don't want to predict greater unhappiness beyond my already almost unbearable sorrow.

Farewell, madame! Farewell, Nelida! Let it be ***until we meet again.***

Against all expectations, Nelida left Italy without any outward sign betraying what was happening inside her. She remained silent and calm throughout the journey and found affectionate words to thank Claudine and her husband for the tender care lavished on her.

But once in Lyon, Monsieur Bernard saw that she was shattered and would not be able to continue the journey.

He dreaded a stay there less than elsewhere, knowing that Nelida had never been to that city with Guermann and would find none of the living memories considered so lethal to sorrows beyond cure.

At the bottom of his heart he viewed Guermann's decision as painful but as something that should provide Nelida, if she could overcome her despair, with a happy outcome. "Monsieur de Kervaens is a reasonable man," he often told Claudine when they were alone together. "He'll understand there's no better choice than to take his wife back. Perhaps he'll ask, as a formality, that she spend a few months in a convent. Then he'll go see her, won't mention the past, will bring her back to Brittany—and society, after the obligatory scowl, will be thrilled to rediscover this beautiful, rich woman whose basic mistake, in their eyes, was to be too sincere and not profit from an assured tolerance at the price of a simple hypocrisy."

When he had settled his wife and Nelida in a good inn, Monsieur Bernard went to the post office to check for an answer to a letter he had left there for a family member with whom he had a very warm, although sporadic, relationship. A marked difference of opinion, even greater than the distance of space, separated them. This honest businessman—unconcerned with political shocks or social reforms, who devoted mind and heart to managing his funds and insuring the well-being of his family—was, as one might assume, a staunch supporter of the government. His cousin, on the other hand, a former student at the Polytechnique Institute, had flung himself headlong into radicalism. He was rumored to head a secret society. Several times his name had been implicated in republican plots that, at the time, still threatened the new dynasty. A truly intimate exchange between the two men, then, did not occur. Still, blood ties and natural sympathy between honorable hearts had endured, and it was with genuine delight that Monsieur Bernard made his way to Faubourg Guillotière and knocked on the door of his cousin, Emile Ferez.

After the initial unanswered questions that fly by during a reunion following long absence, Monsieur Bernard briefly told his cousin the sad circumstances bringing him to Lyon and the worries keeping him there. As he spoke Madame de Kervaens' name, he was interrupted by a woman he hadn't previously noticed, due to the room's dim light. She had been sitting at the end of the room opposite the chimney, near which he chatted with Ferez.

"Madame de Kervaens is here!" the woman exclaimed, coming forward and questioning him with extraordinary intensity. "Where? Take me to her this instant, monsieur, I entreat you!"

The entreaty strongly resembled an order. Astonished, Monsieur Bernard stammered a few words of excuse about an indisposed condition that didn't allow Madame de Kervaens to receive. . . .

"I'm certain she'll receive me," the stranger said. Then, leaning toward Ferez's ear, she spoke to him in a whisper.

"Do as madame asks," he said. "Her presence can only help your friend."

Monsieur Bernard made no further objection. He offered his arm to the unknown person, not without a sense of displeasure at the thought of crossing the entire city with a woman so bizarrely decked out.

The stranger wore a black dress of coarse fabric. An enormous wooden cross hung around her neck. Rather than put a hat over her gray hair—parted and cut like a man's—she threw a wool scarf over her head and shoulders in preparation to go out.

"I'm used to walking alone," she said, declining Monsieur Bernard's arm. "I lean on no one."

He was only half angered by her rudeness. During the journey between Ferez's residence and Hôtel du Nord, Monsieur Bernard was quite surprised to see that the outfit he found so unusual didn't attract the least attention. His amazement increased when, passing in front of open shops, he saw artisans stand up and bow to the strange figure he

was accompanying. When they saw her, a few children playing in the street stopped their game and ran up to her. Fussing at them for their laziness, she suggested they come see her the next day. Monsieur Bernard was dumbfounded. Finally they arrived at the hotel.

"Whom should I announce to Madame de Kervaens?" he asked, placing his hand on the apartment door. Without answering, the stranger pushed her way into the room. "*Ma Mère*!" exclaimed Claudine, the first to see her. The two women hugged passionately. Nelida struggled to stand and fell back on the couch where she had been resting. The stranger rushed to her. For several minutes there was nothing but embraces, sobs, halting words. Monsieur Bernard, staying discreetly on the threshold and seeing nothing to fear in this meeting, left without his wife seeing him and returned to Ferez's home, curious to have the puzzle finally explained.

"The person you've just accompanied," his cousin told him without waiting for his question, "is the most extraordinary woman I've ever met. For a long time she was Mother Superior at Annonciade Convent. She broke her vows for the most honorable of reasons. You're not enough a part of us," Ferez continued, putting his hand on Monsieur Bernard's shoulder, "for me to tell you her life's secret. But what's certain, and what no one is unaware of, is that she has a nearly miraculous effect on the working class here—on the poor, on women in particular—in a way that will soon be acknowledged. Through her good deeds, her brilliant mind, her eloquence, she has created the kind of kingdom that suits her fearless personality and the affinities of her royal nature. She's a great woman indeed, who'll leave the marks of her passing here on earth."

The two friends talked much longer. Monsieur Bernard was tirelessly questioning Ferez about the life, incomprehensible from his point of view, of the strange woman when Mother Saint Elizabeth entered the room. Going straight to him:

"Madame de Kervaens is in no condition to travel to Paris," she said. "Besides, Paris means nothing to her. Claudine has told me that you can't stay here without major inconvenience to your work. Leave Nelida with me. I'll take responsibility for her. No one else, at this point, could help her more. I'm moving to the hotel, to her own room, until she can be moved here. I won't leave her for a minute. I'll give you a complete report on her. If she feels stronger and wants to return to Paris, you can come for her. Claudine agrees with all of this," she added in an impatient tone, seeing Monsieur Bernard appear to hesitate. "Go help your wife prepare to leave. In an hour I'll be at Hôtel du Nord."

Already accepting Mother Saint Elizabeth's authority, Monsieur Bernard tried to talk to her about Nelida's future and the wish he harbored of reuniting her with her husband. The nun looked at him, smiling oddly.

"Your plan, along with its other drawbacks, comes too late," she said. "Don't you read the papers?" Then, looking through a stack of newspapers and journals piled on the table, she pulled out a *Moniteur* from six or eight days earlier and read:

> *A terrible accident has just plunged the Department of Ille-et-Vilaine into dismay. Monsieur le Compte de Kervaens, last heir of the illustrious family by that name, was accidentally killed by one of his neighbors while hunting. These types of accidents recur with such frequency that we believe it is our duty, etc. . . .*

Not answering, Monsieur Bernard shook Ferez's hand and left.

Part Five

XXIII

Alone you must spread your wings,
Alone you must venture upon the sea of life,
Alone you must follow your ideals,
Alone, alone you must strive for your heaven.

—*George Herwegh*

Nearly a month went by. Receiving an additional shock on learning of her husband's death, Nelida was far from well. Mother Saint Elizabeth's hopes didn't materialize, and the nun began to share Ferez's fear that Nelida's condition was beyond cure. She would have rathered, but dared not, confront this hidden sorrow head-on. She both dreaded and wished for a crisis that could prove fatal but that could also lead past the moral lethargy in which Nelida seemed mired.

One evening they were together in Nelida's room, seated on either side of the hearth, making bandages for the wounded. Nelida's fingers mechanically shredded the cloth. Her mind was elsewhere.

"Nelida, Nelida—" Mother Saint Elizabeth finally said, no longer able to hold back the sharp edge of her pain,

"I'm not pleased with you, my child. This isn't what I had a right to expect of your affection and your courage."

Nelida raised her eyes, looked at her in utter surprise, remained silent a few seconds, then, with a rush of movement, threw herself into the nun's arms and dissolved in tears.

"Here we are, the way we were when I found you praying in your room," the nun said gravely. "God has plans for us, Nelida, since he's bringing us back together in the same way again today, after such brutal trials."

Nelida shook her head in disagreement.

"God can't have plans for the dead," she said. "There's no life left in me. I have nothing to do in this world, either for myself or for others."

"Don't be blasphemous!" the nun exclaimed. "In heaven's name, don't blaspheme God, life, yourself. The fierce selfishness of certain kinds of pain is the most shameful impiety of all."

At the bitter reproach, Nelida pulled herself from the nun's arms and sat back in her armchair in silence.

"My destiny is finished," she continued, seeing that Mother Saint Elizabeth was not breaking the silence.

"Destiny! That's a vain word. Our destiny is our character, our abilities guided or not guided by our will—or our cowardly surrender. Who, then, before the hour of death would dare pretend to have made himself into a finished product—worthy of praise by the everlasting artist, ushered into the presence of infinite beauty? Your abilities are vast, Nelida. The accounting you'll have to give will be severe."

"I don't understand you, Mother. What can I do now? What could I want?"

"I'm wrong," the nun said in a much softer tone, taking Nelida's hand and squeezing it tenderly. "You can't find meaning to my words because I've never opened my heart to you. You don't know me yet. Would it tire you to hear the short version of my life? When you've heard me, perhaps we'll understand one another more easily. If we can't, at

least we'll know we no longer need to stay together. I'll give you back to your friends, from whom I ripped you with jealous passion and enormous hope. With resignation, I'll take up my solitary way once more."

"I'm listening with all my soul," Nelida said, pulling her armchair closer to the stool on which Mother Saint Elizabeth always sat.

The nun collected herself a moment and began:

"I didn't know my mother. My father was a man of stern mind, cold disposition, strong intellect, whose heart—I never knew if he had a heart. His single-minded preference for business, which was his longtime and primary activity, absorbed all the energy and life he might have had. Everyone else, including his children, found him unfeeling. He didn't seem to care about being loved. He wouldn't have had time for it. It was enough for him to be obeyed, and in that, everything around him gave total satisfaction. His will was never contested or even scrutinized. We submitted to it as if it were an immutable force, an abstract justice it would have been insane to try to sway. I had a step-sister brought up in Germany by a maternal aunt. As for me, if I stayed home it was surely because my father, who was always busy with other things, hadn't thought to put me elsewhere, rather than from any sentiment of fatherly tenderness. I was never sick, not at all noisy, rather uncommunicative, and extremely independent in my ways. So I was never a burden to him. There was no reason for him to notice I was around.

"I stayed this way for a number of years, always visible without his seeming either to enjoy or resent my presence. In terms of education, it goes without saying that I received none. At fifteen, I'd barely opened a book. Nevertheless, my mind hadn't been deprived—far from it. My father, who had no friends in the sense you and I attach to the word, had extremely close political connections. His salon was the usual meeting place for former or future ministers or all those who left their mark in any way on diplomacy, administration, and journalism. They spoke freely and brilliantly.

They evaluated men and events from a high-minded perspective, with an unflinching rigor of logic that was exempt from passion. There, from a corner of the room where I was ignored rather than included, eyes and ears wide open, I greedily collected my first precepts about the ways of the world. Given to observation, my mind developed modes of thought and a vigorous tempering of its nature from the serious conversations of those elite intellects.

"Encouraged by the benevolence of one of the kindly old gentlemen who gathered in our home, I dared a few times to ask questions that surprised him. He let me talk and learned that not only was I aware of all the subjects under discussion but that I could follow a rigorous line of argument, that I quickly grasped the right point in questions, often settling them in my own way with uncommon shrewdness.

" 'Do you know,' he said one day to one of our regular guests who was astonished to see him talk to me for nearly an hour with a seriousness that could, in effect, seem strange, 'do you know that we have here a young Roland? She'll do a *letter to the king* for us when one's needed.'

"The name stayed with me.

"I wanted to know if the comparison was flattering, so I had my father's secretary bring me the *Mémoires* of the proud woman from Gironde. One thing struck me and made a deep impression on my mind: the serious role someone of my gender was able to play—the influence she exerted on masculine minds and the sublime sacrifice that crowned her heroic struggle. Women, then, could also be great, strong, amount to something—finally! That thought made me feverish. Madame Roland earned my respect. I wanted to know other women that France remembered. Héloïse, Joan of Arc, Madame de Maintenon, Madame de Staël became objects of special study for me. Then I enlarged the circle and entered the domain of history and philosophy. My father's secretary came to my aid.

"Ferez was a man of unusual ability, and, in the silence required for his position, spirited passions were brooding inside him. Republican to the marrow of his bones, all he

was waiting for was the moment when a small inheritance necessary for his independence would be paid to him, and then he could give up his servile job and throw himself openly into the conspiracy then planning the monarchy's overthrow. Seeing my enthusiasm for noble ideas, he set aside any misgivings about me, and, in the long, intimate talks that followed my readings, he introduced me to the plans of the radical youth. I felt the fibers of my heart thrill to these projects. Soon, the day wasn't long enough to satisfy my thirst for knowledge. I spent entire nights reading, devouring the history of the French Revolution, eighteenth-century writers, all the most prominent writings of our modern socialists. I had put the portrait of Madame Roland on my table. Ferez convinced me that I looked like my heroine. From then on, a mysterious voice hasn't stopped whispering in my ear that I too might one day—.

"Just then, his sister-in-law's death forced my father to take back into his home the elder daughter I mentioned to you, whom I'd never seen. Following German custom, she came with an escort—a stiff and stuffy female chaperone who, from the start, filled me with overwhelming loathing. As for my sister, I have to confess I had a lot of trouble getting used to her strange appearance. Though she wasn't ugly, at least not in any definable way, she was nevertheless as devoid of charm as it's possible to be at twenty-two with lovely skin and beautiful hair and fairly good features. Perhaps she was predisposed to morbid obesity, or perhaps the whale body imprisoning her had provoked a natural reaction, or perhaps she'd eaten too much starch or thought too little or suffered too little—the fact remains that she was afflicted with an absurd bulk and was without a human shape. And additionally, since she didn't suspect her misfortune, she added to the unsettling impression she made by her unbelievable pretensions. She held her nose in the air, tilted her body backward, spoke in a haughty voice, and decked herself out in gaudy colors, like some theater queen. Her entry into my father's salon was truly a disaster. Elderly men tend to be fussy about beauty.

" 'Do you know that your sweet sister looks enough like one of those puffed-up, hollowed-out donuts, naughtily called Nun's Farts, that she could pass for one?' said the cynical, mocking old man who'd given me my nickname.

"I let out a burst of laughter that went through the whole circle. I don't know if my sister heard. The fact is she turned pale, and, from then on, I could tell I had sparked an undying hatred in her heart whose effects wouldn't be long in showing. Every day the seething hostility became more noxious.

"In the unfortunate body I've just described there dwelled the slenderest of minds—but besotted, drunk, clogged with its own notion of excellence. My sister had been listened to like an oracle in the court of Hildburghausen, where her status as a Frenchwoman gave her a distinct advantage. Nothing was funnier in Paris than to see her maintain the arrogant, condescending attitude of bygone superiority, showing her pride over being French, speaking French, writing French properly, wearing French hats. I've never encountered a vanity more off the mark. Her female chaperone, who shamelessly curried her favor, learned one day that I hadn't done regular studies in the manner understood by boarding schools and that my sentences weren't always in perfect grammatical alignment. I think she must have wept for joy over that. Talking to me disdainfully but brimming with compassion, she advised me to have my sister loan me her own treatise on the adverbs of place, a little masterpiece written for the instruction of the young princess of Hildburghausen, copies of which had been requested by all the courts of Germany, my sister's modesty not allowing her to have it reprinted. I restrained myself more than usual and promised to consult Euphrasie over the problems of syntax. But it did no good. Envy can't be fooled. Despite being blinded by self-love, she hadn't failed to notice the minimal effect she'd caused in our father's salon with her long-winded discourses on participles and her endless descriptions of ceremonies at Hildburghausen Court.

"Little by little, the rare individuals who out of courtesy approached the sofa, where she held forth in magisterial

dignity, fled the spot and came to gather by the open window, around a little stool like this one," said Mother Saint Elizabeth, whose memories of her youth had, over the past few moments, soothed the lines in her dark, care-worn brow. "There, rather awkwardly perched, was I, tapestry-work in hand, periodically tossing in a word, or just a look that gave new wings to the conversation and lent it a charm that discussions among men quickly lose when a woman isn't there to keep them to some degree refined and balanced. My sister became bitter, and, being extremely calculating, she told herself that as long as I was in the house, not only would she create no impression but, additionally and more seriously, she wouldn't find a husband. At that moment she made up her mind to get rid of me as fast as possible and by whatever means. My carelessness helped.

"As I've told you, I had a passionate love for study and serious discussion with my young teacher. He was quite busy during the day. Nothing seemed easier than to set up a meeting with him in my room after tea in the salon at ten o'clock. I read summaries of my readings to him, explaining which problems stood in my way. These intimate talks often went on until quite late. What couldn't fail to happen did in fact happen: Ferez fell in love with me and started writing letters, which had an illicit quality that came from his own exaltation and my complete ignorance of the weight certain phrases carried in worldly parlance. My sister and her female chaperone lay in wait. They intercepted our letters. They denounced our evening meetings to my father. He flew into a rage, ran Ferez off, and, having summoned me, informed me he was giving me twenty-four hours to make a decision—either marry a cousin I had already twice refused or enter a convent. With this alternative, my father didn't dream I wouldn't choose marriage. He was wrong.

"This cousin was a country squire from Lot-et-Garonne, an enthusiastic hunter and a dirty farmer. I shuddered at the thought of an existence whose widest scope and greatest pleasures would come from ruling a barnyard and the twists and turns of a fox hunt. God didn't give me a maternal

instinct. I scarcely understood love as I saw it in novels. I couldn't imagine any happiness other than power. Even then my heart pounded for nothing but the idea of an exalted destiny. I had recently gone several times to Annonciade Convent to see one of my relatives who became a nun following a broken heart. She was a weak creature who moaned and complained all day long. She often told me:

" 'Why aren't you in my place? You'll never love anyone. You'd be happy ordering people around. You'd rule with an iron hand. In two years, you'd be named Mother Superior.'

"Those words, spoken absentmindedly, stayed in my memory. I'd looked everywhere for some direction for my jumbled ambitions. I found none. A marriage, however brilliant, put the worst of yokes upon me—that of the whim of an individual who could be noble and intelligent, but who could also be coarse and stupid. Besides, marriage is the household, the gyneceum, salon life. It was an almost certain end to the expansion of my strength, of the influence of my life on other lives—the very image of which fired my brain with fierce desires. The thought of one day directing an entire community and the education of two hundred young girls, continually renewed and recruited from the highest levels of society, took hold of me as the only goal worth the effort. If I could, I told myself, insinuate into these young hearts the feelings overflowing my own; if, instead of the arrogance and vanity they had been fed, I managed to penetrate them with principles of true equality; if I ignited a pure and spirited love of the people in their souls—I would have brought on a revolution! The word made me dizzy.

"I announced to my father that I wanted to enter Annonciade Convent as a novice. He smiled in pity, seeing nothing in the plan but the childish willfulness of frustrated love. My sister talked with him about it, because she knew he wasn't indifferent enough to see me go in so extreme a direction without concern. She assured him that within two

weeks as novitiate my stubbornness would dissolve. My father spoke of it no more. Twenty-four hours later, having alerted the Mother Superior at Ladies of the Annonciade, he had me escorted to the convent. As she kissed me, Euphrasie smiled in a way that showed all the hypocritical satisfaction of her grudge-bearing mediocrity.

"The first person I saw at the convent after the Mother Superior was Father Aimery. His ability impressed me. I quickly saw in him a nature like mine in ambition, courage, and perseverance. He appeared to understand me as well. The encounter seemed providential. I knew he was all-powerful in his order and highly influential in society. In my mind I connected him with all my plans, and, without yet opening my whole heart to him, I essentially entrusted him with all my hopes. A short time after I entered the convent, my father became ill. He died two days prior to the date set for my first vows, still waiting for me to pull out and beg for forgiveness. On the pretext of distracting me but in reality to test me, they had me leave Paris and go successively to the most remote provincial establishments. For six years my behavior was the most edifying anyone at the convent could remember. It betrayed absolutely nothing but an exemplary piety and a total abnegation of will. My birth and fortune, besides, gave me such advantages that, on the day of election, I was unanimously named Mother Superior.

"From the moment I had power in hand, I thought about opening up to Father Aimery. I didn't doubt he would be ready to second me. We had a meeting I won't forget for the rest of my life. It lasted six hours. We began by setting up our starting points. They were the same: between the two of us, acquire the greatest amount of authority possible; secure blind submission from within; work as a team to distract or defeat leaders who could oppose us; flatter, seduce the youth entrusted to us; use them to infiltrate the families. Up to that point, everything went marvelously. But suddenly a huge rupture occurred in the conversation. The ground on which we were treading without any other

precautions, thinking ourselves already in agreement, collapsed from below. Father Aimery and I found ourselves separated by an abyss. The goal of all this reclaimed influence, this power that radiated both to the inner and outer spheres, was for him the full and total reestablishment of his order's former omnipotence—favoring everything I viewed as vile prejudice. He allowed me to glimpse the secret affiliations with the leaders of the nobility, the promises exchanged, the engagements taken for the return to a state of affairs that appalled me.

"My astonishment was violent. I couldn't hold it in, and, in a flood of words in which my long-suppressed hopes rushed out, I let slip, with childish thoughtlessness, the secret of my whole life. Father Aimery looked at me a long time, as if he saw before his eyes a person suddenly struck with madness. Then I saw him say an inner prayer. Finally, he announced that I was singularly deceitful, that I had, with satanic skill, tricked him and everyone, but that he knew how to keep me from doing harm, that, since the authority conferring my new status could not be withdrawn, he would at least keep vigil at all times and denounce me on my first imprudent word. He added, too, more softly, that he hoped time and reflection would bring health back to my thought and return me to myself.

"After he left me, I too thought that all the things I had just heard couldn't be true, that the priest had spoken that way to tempt me. But the illusion didn't last long, and I saw myself face to face with a truly grim destiny.

"I won't tell you—it would take too long—all the torments of the years that followed: my vain efforts to win over Father Aimery at least to some partial modifications in teaching, my aborted efforts toward several other ecclesiastics, and finally the total inaction to which I saw myself condemned by their suspicious vigilance. When you entered the convent, Nelida, I was plunged in the most dismal hopelessness. The sight of your face glowing with a divine light, what I glimpsed of nobility, grandeur, and pride in your

soul, rekindled the life force in me. And, when you told me you felt a calling, I couldn't hide the joy I felt. Father Aimery suspected some ambush. He was probably convinced that you shared my opinions and that he would have two rebel spirits to hold back instead of one. In short, he was set against your taking the habit, and we had some very heated arguments that ended with the threat of having me discharged in a general assembly. I shuddered to think that from one day to the next, in effect, I could see myself stripped of the authority that had been my safeguard and fall unprotected in the hands of my enemies. That was when I devised an initial plan of flight.

"A letter I received from Ferez a short time later, through the intermediary of a personal maid who had stayed devoted to me, focused my vague plan and hastened its execution. Ferez informed me that he had married in Geneva, where he had just founded a newspaper. He was gathering talented men around him and was working for the good cause. His wife, he added, shared all his ideas and was helping him enthusiastically.

"The concluding words were decisive. I escaped from the convent with my faithful Rose. She had gotten me a passport and a carriage that I found ready for departure at her home. Three days later I was in Switzerland. For two years I've lived in relative hiding, always afraid of being tracked down by Father Aimery. But the complete silence on that front—as well as from my sister, who, respectably married in Germany, hardly concerns herself with hearing about me—reassured me. During that time, I prepared myself, I can say, with fervor for the mission I believe I've been called to do; when Ferez made the decision to return to France and locate the center of his activity in Lyon, I let him know I'd decided to follow him.

"You're perhaps amazed, Nelida, to see me take asylum under the roof of a man whose passion for me was known. Do you think it may have been disloyal of me to wedge myself into this tranquil union and risk disturbing the

happiness of two individuals I respected? It's clear I acted imprudently. I was more happy than I was careful. I had left a young man; I found an old one in his place—his brow wrinkled by deep thought, his heart taken over by political passion, his senses snuffed out by the power of thought. When we saw one another again, we hardly spoke of ourselves. The *cause*, the sacred cause for which Ferez was ready to give his life, utterly absorbed him. He was delighted to find in me an assistant whose value he exaggerated. Very strong with pen in hand, Ferez was not a gifted speaker and couldn't act directly on the masses. He found me eloquent, begged me to throw my scruples away and not be afraid to preach our doctrines openly.

"At first I tried some proselytizing among the women. I wanted to found an association, a type of free convent whose only mission was charity. But, alas! how quickly I became disgusted! All those brains so hollow, those hearts so frivolous! The women were getting drunk on ideas like men on wine who are unused to it, and what sparked a certain extravagant enthusiasm for new ideas in them was the rather ill-concealed notion that they could give themselves over to their weaknesses with no restraint or shame. Discouraged on that side, I directed my efforts elsewhere. I had often been to workshops and prisons with Ferez, where he brought help and hope. There I found such manly courage, such simple and heroic virtues, that an idea long nourished in silence came back to me forcefully.

" 'Since the last revolution,' he told me, 'our country hasn't regained its equilibrium. Two classes of society, the nobility and the people, are victimized by acute suffering. One is undergoing an imaginary illness, the other a real one. The nobility, because it sees itself stripped of its privileges and honors by an arrogant middle class; the people, because the triumph of this middle class, brought to power by them, has been nothing but a cruel disappointment. By comparison, they're beginning to miss their former masters. Since they read little history, they remember only the great

lord's courteous manners and generosity. Why don't these two classes, enlightened by experience, reach an agreement on their common adversary? Why don't the people's courageous instincts—the spirit of honor and nobility—triumph over a selfish middle class already nervous over its welfare? Why not try to make the connection? Why wouldn't the women—who by nature have all the refinement of the aristocracy and all the passion for charity of the people—become the apostles and intermediaries of this alliance?'

"Ferez encouraged my illusion. 'There are times,' he told me, 'when the spirit of truth pulls away from men. The prophetic view is then given to woman, who utters, often without her own full comprehension, words of salvation. A woman made France Christian; a woman saved it from a foreign yoke. A woman once more—everything points to it—will light the torch of the future.'

"Thus exalted, emboldened, I intensified my zeal and was able to form a large association of workers that I first enlightened about their material interests. I shamed them for their drunkenness, their stupid, bloody rivalries. Then I led them to want, for themselves and their children, regular instruction in moral education. Seeing that they listened to me obediently, I thought of completing my work and going into the châteaux to find good and pious women whom I hoped to interest by presenting my work to them from the point of view of Christian charity. I obtained a letter for one of the most important ones in the province. She welcomed me warmly and introduced me to her friends.

"This time I behaved with a great deal of circumspection, moving step by step, gradually acquiring first money, then strong emotional support, next making personal connections among the most enlightened of my aristocratic disciples and the families of workers whose behavior I knew to be the most refined. Wherever I saw a preference for new doctrines, I ventured further. Every day we cheered, Ferez and I, the success of my propaganda, until my ill-fated destiny allowed Father Aimery to find me. That was my ruin.

He denounced me in the châteaux as a nun without morals, escaped from the cloister. Immediately, all doors closed. But his hatred didn't stop there. He knew how to hurt me among the decent artisans whose mother and sister I'd become. He made me out to be a spy. Distrust crept into their souls, and now I must fight every type of problem that I despair of solving."

Nelida, who had listened to the nun with increasing attention, her large eyes shining with frightening brilliance against her dull, hollow cheeks, said to her:

"One sees very well, Mother, that you also despair."

"I despair of myself, not of the *cause*," answered the nun. "Providence is just. It couldn't want so pitiful a tool for such noble ends. My goal was lofty but my motive small. And all of us, all must be subjected to the pain of our flaws. Ambition devoured me. My desire to make a name for myself drew me into blameworthy attitudes. I entered the cloister without having the blind faith that would have sustained me. All I wanted was power. Twice it has escaped me at the very moment I thought I had seized it. Yes, Nelida, man's destiny exerts a rigorous justice. You see me broken by the weapon chosen for my advancement. I dishonorably broke vows I had made disloyally. Those vows hound me and negate my achievement. I wanted the brilliance of great fame. The disgrace that so rightly clings to the perjurer marks my brow as well.

"Besides," she continued, "I'm an incomplete being because I've never loved. I haven't known that divine feeling that makes one live a double life. I've desired neither spouse nor child. I've been nothing but a vainglorious woman, as grand in appearence as one can be by strength of mind, but in reality quite a stunted creature to whom nature refused a heart capable of love."

And, for the first time in many years, the nun wept hot tears. Finally regaining control, she cried out: "But what I've been unable to do, what couldn't be given to me, others more worthy or more fortunate will accomplish. Oh, Nelida!

If you had half my courage! If only you would agree to live! If you saw, if you heard, even once, those outrageous misfortunes I've so often prayed to change, you'd be ashamed of your despair. And *you* would be answered," the nun added, taking Nelida's hand and squeezing it in her own, "because you're worthy of such a destiny. You're neither a selfish lover nor an unfaithful wife any more. You're a widow who's free, who has been tested, and who's won the right, through grief and love, to devote herself to great ideas. Your soul has never accepted evil passions. God can still pour his purest rays on you."

Nelida smiled bitterly.

"Do I even know any more how to pray to this God you invoke?" she asked. "Do I know how he wants me to pray? Can I still *believe?*"

"What needs to be believed?" the nun said heatedly. "Be happy with hope! In these sad times, I'm afraid those who say they believe are lying to others or themselves. The faith required by established religion, elevating itself above the ruins of reason, today repulses a thinking creature because it seems an insult to the most divine attribute of human nature. Everything is incomplete, insufficient. The philosophers' abstract certainty is pathetic because it satisfies neither the heart nor the imagination. Mankind, this puny, narrow-minded being, with all his powers, isn't strong enough to rise to the level of God. Even when he concentrates all the force of his mind, heart, and will on a single point, he doesn't always gain faith. More often, he acquires hope.

"Thirst for the ideal is in you, Nelida. The *ideal* has been the strength and the anguish of your life. You thought you'd find it in turning away from the cloister. I'll always congratulate myself, in spite of your misfortunes, for having disenchanted you. It appeared in your marriage. That's where it would be for most women if society hadn't falsified the natural state of this serious contract. Later, you looked for it in exclusive, passionate love. That was your most deadly illusion. I'm far from accusing the one you loved. He's worth

perhaps no more or no less than another man. In him, selfishness used its most beautiful disguise: a poetic one. But he wasn't worthy of your sublime sacrifice. He felt you were blind, and that impression caused him great torment, from which he freed himself through great weaknesses. Do you want to cry forever over a mistake that can be made right? Do you want to drown in your tears? Do you want to hand God a soul devoid of good?"

Mother Saint Elizabeth had talked a long time. The lamp had gone out and the first glimmers of dawn penetrated the room. The deserted streets began to ring with the ponderous sounds announcing the workers' activity. A few carts, bringing the day's provisions to the city, rolled heavily over the echoing cobblestone. The nun moved to the window. Nelida stood, then followed her in silence. They both leaned against the balcony and looked out—at the street where occasionally a worker, weighed by his tools, passed by, and at the sky where pale stars still struggled against the invading daylight.

"*Come to me*, our savior said to these people," the nun said, gesturing to the street. "Well, I'm telling you: *Go to them!*"

Nelida bent down to that inspired hand and, in an emotional voice, murmured words that Mother Saint Elizabeth guessed rather than heard.

"You're willing to live?" the nun said with joy.

"I'll try, at least," Nelida answered.

XXIV

In his abrupt separation from Nelida and his disregard for a life to which he had so recklessly laid claim—actions for which he owed accountings to God and humans—Guermann was a long way from comprehending the full extent of the wrong he had done. He had not begun to imagine their probable consequences. For some time he behaved and talked like someone half drunk. His long inactivity and the artificial stimulation of his social life caused a turbulence at whose center he heard only the muffled roar of his hurt pride. He was tormented by a single need: whatever the cost, to escape consciousness of his mistake, of his sharp disappointment in himself—the relentless punishment of highly developed constitutions that try vainly to make use of their gifts. He thought he would benefit in every way by no longer seeing beside him the pale and severe face of Nelida, whose crushing silence pushed him into himself. And since in his eyes the brilliance of success justified—glorified even—every flaw, he grabbed the opportunity to attract public attention, never doubting that Nelida, whom he loved even more than he had thought, would be dazzled by the prestige of his newly regained celebrity and soon confess her unreasonableness and bow, repentant and happy, before the genius of her lover, whom she had for a moment misjudged.

The nervous shock of so violent a decision, the memory of his easy success with the Marquise Zepponi, and, more than those, the dim outlines of a higher position to be had immediately in a new society and a new country stirred his anxiety more and more during the long journey. When he

arrived at T___, all his youthful ambition revived and his pounding heart seemed to rush ahead of him to meet a great and impending achievement.

He rested no more than a few minutes, then rushed to the grand duke's palace. His highness was out, but orders had been given that, when he arrived, Guermann was to be led to the head chamberlain, supervisor of theaters and court celebrations. It was ten in the morning.

The lofty figure's antechamber was filled with clients and petitioners seated side by side on narrow benches that lined the room, waiting silently, patiently, religiously, eyes riveted to his excellency's door, for the blessed moment when this holy-of-holies might open to one of them. Guermann's arrival caused a slight stir in the gathering. The last ones seated squeezed closer together to make room for him, but he didn't see fit to notice. After several minutes, he began noisily pacing the floor, muttering all sorts of irreverent words that made the tight-lipped petitioners look at one another in amazement.

For Guermann, this poorly dressed, ill-coifed, uncomfortable company of anxious actors, emeritus singers, and needy authors did little to embellish the hours of waiting, and he felt himself grow angry. He walked unthinkingly to the heater, although the room was suffocating, and burned his fingers. He went to the window. It opened onto a slate roof whose wide gutters, with monotonous regularity, gathered and discharged a dull stream of December rain into some kind of lead reservoir. The view was depressing. With an impatient gesture, Guermann jerked the little starched, muslin curtain closed, tearing it. Finally, capping his recklessness, he returned to the middle of the room near a pedestal table that constituted the room's only ornament and opened a book someone had left there: *The Almanac of Aristocrats*. The assembly of petitioners was worried. Suddenly, his excellency's door opened and, to general stupefaction, a valet called Monsieur Guermann Regnier. The artist bumped the table, making the worthy book tumble to the floor. A young woman

got up, picked it up, and put it back in its place, carefully replacing the bookmark on the page where she thought it must belong. While this was going on, Guermann appeared before the high chamberlain of the grand ducal court. Not the least concerned, this notable man, wearing a dressing gown, was having his coffee with cream while dunking a huge chunk of buttered toast into his cup:

"You're Monsieur Regnier, the French painter?" he asked.

Guermann made a half bow as he placed his hand on a chair in which he would have sat had the chamberlain accorded him the privilege.

"If you would, please pull twice on that bell cord," continued his excellency. "Monsignor the grand duke is on a trip, but he saw fit to order that you be lodged in his palace and nourished at his expense, at the third table. Here's the person in charge of getting you moved in," he added, indicating a type of secretary, come at the bell's sound. "You will need to present yourself today or tomorrow to monsieur the museum director. He will show you the gallery intended for you. You will do well to set to work immediately so that on his return monsignor might find something completed."

Guermann almost made a hugely impertinent remark. But, at the supervisor's sign, the door through which he had been ushered opened again. A petitioner had entered.

The artist had time for nothing more than a French good-bye—that is, as small a bow as possible—and followed the secretary as he swore to himself that his excellency the chamberlain, supervisor of theaters and celebrations of the grand ducal court, would some day pay dearly for this haughty ridicule.

The secretary led Guermann across several service courtyards. Inside the courtyard surrounding the stables, they climbed a little, narrow, dark stairway, much like the one to the atelier on Rue de Beaune, which led to a corridor lined with numbered doors. The secretary inserted the

key in the lock of door number one and ushered Guermann into a rather large, dingy bedroom with as little light as might penetrate two small, octagonal windowpanes rimmed in lead. Flanked on either side by spittoons, a huge stove's formless, black mass anchored the unpleasant room. A bed draped in yellow cloth with crimson fringe, armchairs of Utrecht velvet, a faded rug patched with nearly new segments, two hideous engravings depicting the grand duke and grand duchess in formal dress, and, finally, a piano—a furnishing rarely overlooked in Germany, but one so narrow it could have been mistaken for a backgammon table—made the room ugly with the kind of shabby elegance typical of subordinate lodgings to princely residences in every country.

"On the upper floor is a room with a skylight that will be put at your disposal tomorrow, monsieur," the secretary said, addressing Guermann for the first time. "His excellency thinks it will be an appropriate atelier. Here is the chambermaid in charge of this part of the house," he added, seeing the servant enter—a heavy, hemp-haired Maritornes, with blue-earthenware eyes without brows or lashes, holding a water pitcher in one hand and a stack of towels in the other:

"Annchen, the moment the hour strikes, you'll show monsieur to dining room number three."

Annchen smiled.

"We dine at two o'clock, monsieur," continued the secretary. "You'll find your seating indicated and your place set at the big table on the ground floor. I'll have your things sent for at the inn. Is there anything else you need?"

"Absolutely nothing, monsieur," answered the artist wrathfully.

As soon as the secretary was out of the room, he turned to the servant: "Who eats at table three?"

"It's a fine meal, monsieur; don't worry," Annchen answered, still smiling and only half-understanding Guermann's halting German. "All the meals are cooked here in the same

kitchen. We don't serve one dish more at one table than the other."

"That's not what I'm asking," interrupted Guermann, hardly able to contain himself, since, for the past hour, his vanity had endured one venomous sting after another. "I'm asking which individuals eat at this table."

"Oh, superb company, monsieur! First of all, there's madame the head chambermaid who spent three years in Paris; then, monsieur the private cashier, a nice fellow who's not at all proud and who'll happily toast with monsieur to the health of the great Napoleon, whom he talks about all the time. Then, madame the second governess of the children—"

"That's enough," Guermann said, taking his hat. "You will say that I won't be dining at the table." And he left, slamming the door in such a way that the poor girl, terrified, dropped her stack of towels, wondering whether all French people were in fact truly mad, the way she'd been told. Guermann went down the stairs four at a time, got lost in the courtyards, and wandered into any number of dead ends. After a great many comings and goings, finally locating a partially open gate that led to the street, he left the palace in indescribable exasperation. For a long time he walked aimlessly in the driving rain, not knowing where he was going or what he wanted. His first thought had been to climb immediately into a public coach and take any road whatsoever back to Italy. That plan, modified in the calming effects of the rain, then limited itself to returning to the hotel, setting himself up there, and proudly refusing to stay in the stables and dine with the chambermaids. After a while he decided to seek out the grand duchess to inform her of what was going on, apparently without her knowledge and not to be attributed to anything other than the supervisor's brutal maliciousness.

The rain was still falling, little by little soaking the thin fabric of his frock coat. Slowing his stride, Guermann began thinking more coolly. He thought of the ridiculous figure

he would cut in Nelida's eyes if he came back like a flighty, disappointed child. He remembered the state of his pocketbook, which still allowed him to live independently for several more months but not to prolong his inactivity and reject, in a single outburst, the advantages of a considerable income and significant work.

The cold and wet crept to his shoulders. He finally concluded that the grand duke's absence was the sole cause of all these misunderstandings that, additionally, might not carry all the significance in German custom that French behavior made him attach to it. Imperceptibly, without full consciousness of what he was doing, he began walking once again toward the ducal palace. Crossing a square planted with lime trees, he found himself in view of a vast building whose symmetrical architecture caught his attention. The strange beating of his heart seemed like an omen.

"What is this building, monsieur?" he asked, stopping a passerby who, indifferent to the rain, was walking solemnly under the lime trees while smoking his pipe.

"That's the new museum, monsieur."

Guermann began trembling so profoundly that he turned pale.

His battered pride suddenly began to return to life. All his anger, all his irritation, all his despair vanished at a single thought: "Here's the glory of my future. Here's my immortality!"

He said good-bye to the man and, briskly entering the museum's portico, he asked to see monsieur le directeur. This time, Guermann didn't wait. The director was too curious to see, judge, appreciate, and criticize this intruder—this Frenchman imposed on him by the grand duke's whim—not to welcome him eagerly.

"Well, monsieur, what do you think of our museum?" he asked Guermann with a self-satisfied air after the first exchange of courtesies.

"I find its architecture beyond reproach," Guermann said coolly.

"It must seem quite small, quite trivial to you who come from Paris?"

"I don't make comparisons, monsieur," Guermann interrupted. "The Louvre is the Louvre, and I don't compare the Duchy of T___, grand though it is, to the Kingdom of France."

The director sulked. Taking a bunch of keys hanging above his desk:

"Would you like to see the interior, monsieur?" he asked more politely. "Most of the rooms are completed. Monsignor the grand duke has reserved the middle gallery for you. It unfortunately lags behind in workmanship, but we'll doubtless be fully rewarded by the quality of the work. I feel a great impatience to see your sketches, monsieur. You know that nothing here can be put up without my approval." Seeing Guermann's face darken, he added, "It's purely a formality. For an artist of your caliber, there can be no question of corrections."

"Indeed, monsieur, if I thought my sketches must be subjected to any kind of preliminary censorship, I would immediately renounce the work entrusted to me by the esteemed confidence of his highness."

Not answering, the director moved ahead of Guermann, had him climb a marble stairway decorated in Schwanthaler bas-reliefs, and ushered him into the museum's first room, destined for the antique collection. The frescoed walls and ceilings depicted mythological figures.

"This first room is the work of two of my students," the director said with contained satisfaction. "That *Judgment of Paris* has just been completed by young Ewald of Cologne. He's a boy who'll go far."

Guermann could praise in complete sincerity the noble style and grandiose effect of the compositions.

"I'm aware that German artists are criticized for their weak execution," the director said. "That criticism rests on an error of judgment. The fresco calls for a boldness incompatible with painstaking detail and finish. You've painted

frescoes, haven't you?" the director asked, pointing to show Guermann the ceiling of the gallery they had just entered. "Here's a fine spot in which to distinguish yourself. The natural light in here is excellent—a rare situation for ceiling painters."

Seeing the huge gallery, Guermann felt his heart clutch painfully. A cold sweat broke out on his forehead. He was mute, sweeping with one appalled glance across the solemn vault in its dazzling whiteness, the vast expanse inundated with light. Lowering his eyes, he caught the director's ironic gaze. He thought he was seeing Mephistopheles.

At that moment, a terrible distress opened before him and doubt entered his soul. He felt unequal to the task. He assessed the frightening gulf between his strength and his desire—the way a migratory bird planing the ocean senses, as numbness settles over its wings, that it has overestimated its strength, that it won't make it back to shore.

Had Nelida seen the private humiliation and piercing anguish in this single moment of doubt, she would have been all too fully avenged!

XXV

Back in his room, Guermann closed himself in for the rest of that day and the days to follow. The exhaustion of the trip, the warring emotions inside him led to bouts of high fever that transformed, as often happens, spiritual malaise into physical illness. Forcibly diverted from its overwhelming preoccupation, his mind gathered new energy from inactivity, and, when he was able to leave his bed and take possession of his atelier, his creative forces were renewed. One after the other and without hesitation, he composed four fine sketches that, with minor modifications, would comprise the ensemble of his great fresco.

The work momentarily calmed him, making him less concerned with his external discomfort. He saw with greater objectivity the lowly status imposed on him by the protocol in the court of T___ .

He hadn't returned to see the director. He knew from the woman who dined next to him—the top chambermaid from Paris whose prattle he had grown used to from want of anything better—that ill will surrounded him and that the grand duke couldn't be forgiven for the insult he had given native artists in summoning a foreigner to T___. The grand duchess herself, patriot to the core, refused on one pretext or the other to receive this Frenchman—described to her as a revolutionary bloodsucker—before her husband came back. Fortunately, Guermann was happy enough with his sketch to want to transfer it to cartoons. That serious work filled his hours and calmed his anxiety.

One morning, just as he reached his atelier and, in a uninspired frame of mind, was readying his palette, someone knocked on his door. Before he could answer, a young man he didn't know entered resolutely and came to him: "You're Guermann Regnier," he said with a heavy German accent. "I'm Ewald from Cologne. Shake my hand!" His expression was so sincere and friendly, his smile so warm, his face so open, his beautiful blond hair fell with such grace on his velvet clothes that Guermann, for the first time in a long time, was won over by a quick sympathy. Shaking the hand of his impromptu friend:

"Welcome, monsieur," he said warmly, "and allow me to offer my excuses for not having been told—."

"Between artists, no such formalities are necessary," said Ewald, dropping on a chair, like someone who plans to stay, his grey beaver Tyrolean hat decorated with a rosette of green, chamois-trimmed silk and topped by a plume of grouse feathers. "You couldn't have known I was back," he added, sending a quick, searching look at Guermann's drawings, the way an artist appraises a man completely with a single glance, down to the slightest detail. "In your place, I wouldn't have had the patience to wait for you. I know your *Jean Huss*, you know my *Judgment of Paris*; so, we know each other and should like each other, don't you think?"

Guermann smiled without answering. The naive show of unbiased admiration flattered him, but he was nearly thrown off balance by the abrupt informality.

"On my word of honor, my friend, you do a good thing," Ewald continued, unconcerned with the French artist's exceptional reserve, "planting that damned easel painting over there and coming out here to help us. There are big things to be done in these galleries. The architect is a great fellow who didn't skimp on daylight. Have you already done frescoes?"

At that question, posed to him for the second time, Guermann felt, as he had the first time, a vague uneasiness. He wanted to lie, but young Ewald's sincere look forced him to be truthful.

"No," he said, "and I confess I'm having a few second thoughts—"

"What?" interrupted Ewald. "What's a technical problem to an artist? Eight days of work, no more. As for me, who knows nothing about some things you've already mastered, I've known how to do frescoes since I was a child. In no time I'll show you everything I know—come on!—and it won't cost you much—. Ah, here's a magnificent head," he said, pulling a figure of *Meditation* out of a box where he'd been leafing for several minutes. Unconsciously and involuntarily, Guermann had given it Nelida's features, bearing, and expression. "Frankly, it's the best of everything I've just seen. Now *that's* new, *that's* creative! Michaelangelo's pencil did that!" And the young artist's eyes sparkled with unequivocal admiration. Guermann was disconcerted to hear a pure recollection of his love praised as a sign of creative genius. As had often happened for some time now, he slipped quickly into a daydream. Nelida's memory, touching and cruel, returned.

Ewald noticed Guermann's discomfort. Concerned that his presence might distract from the Muse's inspiration, he cut his visit short and left the atelier much sooner than planned, nevertheless promising to come back the next day.

He did, in fact, come back, not just the next day, but the day after that and every day. He came back, drawn by Guermann's complex nature, by the charm of his manners, and by what was strange, to him incomprehensible, in the disordered ideas and vague turmoil of this figure that was both powerful and fragile. He saw Guermann suffer almost constantly. His Germanic frankness unable to see social inequality—about which Guermann talked incessantly—as a serious cause for pain, he listened in amazement to the denunciations proffered by the artist, whose lips increasingly twisted in bitterness. He guessed some hidden grief—homesickness, perhaps, or even more likely, the absence of a beloved woman—lay behind these fabricated tantrums, and he liked his new friend the better for it. Instead of

confronting him, he decided it would be more helpful to draw him out of his destructive solitude and, no matter what happened, distract him. With these warmhearted intentions in mind, he proposed that Guermann accompany him once to the Benedictine wine cellar where he regularly spent his evenings among young students. Guermann followed him there. Ewald's company held enormous appeal for him, and, though nothing was ever said about their personal lives, an unspoken bond drew them together. Ewald looked at Guermann with admiration and sadness, the way one might look at a smoking volcano capable of erupting. And Guermann comfortably breathed the aura of this simple, decent, enthusiastic, and gentle being who offered him, withholding nothing, all the balm of his poetic youth.

Arriving at the arcaded courtyard of a former Benedictine convent, Guermann was surprised when Ewald descended five or six battered steps and ushered him, opening an oaken door studded with heavy iron nails, into the most famous and popular tavern in T___. An acrid cloud of tobacco smoke, mixed with smells of beer and grilled meat, hit his nostrils. A hellish racket deafened him.

"Be brave!" Ewald said. "You need to be, I admit, at first. But in a while you'll get used to it and won't think about it. I've told them you're an unhappy man. You won't have to pay a thing, and, unless I'm wrong, this easy, open life, this basically affectionate company—though a little rough in talk—won't leave you bored."

As he spoke, the taverner-brewer Anton Kruger came out in short pants, dyed stockings, and a white apron buttoned to his chin, cotton cap in hand, a ring of keys at his belt. Greeting Ewald with informal respect: "I wish my guests a pleasant evening," he glanced with satisfaction at the stranger whose presence would bring honor to his tavern. "My beer today is fantastic; all these gentlemen are ecstatic over it." While he was praising his product and Ewald was moving toward the back of the tavern through the waves of dense smoke highlighted here and there by the light of a

sooty candle, Guermann glanced quickly at the bizarre scene before him.

The Benedictine cellar hadn't stolen its name. It was a true cellar, with seeping walls, draping cobwebs, and outside light from small, high windows. The back was stacked with enormous beer kegs. The wooden tables and benches were lined symmetrically along the wall. The only waitress in this pleasure palace, Monsieur Kruger's own daughter, the fresh-faced Bébé, whose heavy braids interwoven with flowing ribbons, red skirt trimmed in black velvet, gorget of elegant white linen, fine garnet necklace, and whose confident look and nimble movements signaled a beauty particularly sure of herself, coming and going ceaselessly—here, there, from the tables in the meatlocker, to the beer kegs, answering each person with eye and voice, scattering smiles, and occasionally issuing a stern reprimand for some bold student's overly expressive gesture.

"Gentlemen," the young artist said, approaching the table where his many friends had gathered, "I present to you Monsieur Guermann Regnier, a French painter."

The din was so great at the happy table that only those closest heard. The others paid no attention to the new guest's arrival. The noise of arguments, toasts, bursts of laughter, glasses, clinking forks, spontaneous tirades, and mischievous flirtations with beautiful Hebe, the cupbearing goddess who waited on this Olympian farce, surged on and even seemed to swell in shrillness and intensity.

"What's gotten into them tonight?" Ewald asked his neighbor, a slightly more serious figure whose cap sat more bookishly on his bald forehead and who, leaning comfortably on the table, was smoking his pipe with a magisterial air.

"Reinhold set them off. He's come from Berlin where he let himself get bogged down in Schelling's stupidities. He went so far as to tell us a minute ago that Hegel hadn't thoroughly understood the absolute identity of subject and object. That was a little too much to swallow. Müller answered in kind. If I hadn't said *'whoa'!* they'd have fought

right then. The Philistines were so scared they cleared out, leaving their glasses half full."

Guermann listened intently to these strange discussions and studied with curiosity the group holding forth at the opposite end of the table. There he saw the open, laughing faces suggesting Ewald's noble type, without as much intelligence and charm. The clothes of these young students accentuated the youthful serenity of their features. Nearly all of them wore short frock coats tapered at the waist or velvet coats trimmed with braid and silk tassels. Their delicate, white necks rose unfettered from tieless, open-necked shirts. A few wore silver-mounted auroch horns on shoulder straps. All of them held in their hands long, porcelain-headed pipes engraved in the likeness of some great man: Luther, Gutenberg, Beethoven, or Goethe. Each had before him a standard, pewter-lidded glass, wider at bottom than top, holding a half bottle of beer, in which the student every evening regularly drowned the little bit of reason acquired since the preceding meal—that is, among the most sober, whatever had been acquired over the past three or four hours.

Reading Guermann's face for impressions, Ewald saw that after his initial curiosity had been satisfied Guermann was no longer greatly amused by this battle of lungs, gullets, and gestures that the students honored with the name of free discussion. Rising all of a sudden from his seat and striking the table with a vigorous blow of his fist that made all the glasses rattle and all eyes turn to him:

"Seems to me, gentlemen," he said, "that we're repeating ourselves like Monsieur de Schlegel, and that we think like Philistines. Trust me—let's leave Hegel and Schelling in peace; to celebrate my fine friend the Parisian painter, let's sing a German song together. Gentlemen, let us sing *Wo ist des Deutschen Vaterland?*"

The young men immediately stood up, shifting instantly from the noisiest high spirits to something akin to religious devotion. One of them giving the pitch in a resonant voice,

they rendered Professor Arndt's song—the famous one that thirty-two German governments allow to pour forth all the pent-up patriotism and independence afflicting school-age youth—with power and an impeccable sense of moderation.

Guermann was too much an artist not to feel genuine pleasure listening to this beautiful music performed with such energetic frankness. Having become more expansive from the effects of the beer he had not been able to keep from drinking despite his initial repugnance, he went up to young Reinhold, who had sung the solos, and, holding out his hand, warmly expressed his admiration.

The handshake set off a general explosion. Twenty-some-odd hands were extended to Guermann almost at the same time. Invitations to drink followed one another. He didn't think he could refuse. Ewald had warned him it would be rude to do so. Nevertheless, seeing that the effects of drink were becoming apparent, and concerned that an aristocratic arrogance and condescension of tone in Guermann's speech, at first unnoticed, were beginning to cause some to prick up their ears, Ewald made an excuse, and, leaving the tavern at its noisiest moment, he led Guermann, whose legs were unsteady, to his room at the ducal palace.

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XXVI

"And why should I care what's thought, said, and done in a place where I don't want to be?" Ewald asked Guermann in a discussion they had often resumed since the night at the tavern. "Why should I care, let's say, about this gilded cage you call society when I hold the God-given right to all of creation, with all it has to offer my eyes and my intelligence?"

"But how," asked Guermann, "—you with so generous and strong a soul—can you not be driven to punish the arrogance of our century's privileged elite and, through your own actions, *redeem* (that was the grand Saint-Simonian word that kept coming out of his mouth) a class of noble and oppressed men?"

"Once again, for whose benefit, my dear Guermann? You say I'm too modest. Isn't it just the opposite—that my pride is greater than yours because it won't stoop to envy what isn't enviable? You think I lack ambition? I have an ambition—one never satisfied but never discouraged either: to get closer and closer to the divine ideal through my art!"

"Let's agree you acted wisely by not forcing your way into a society whose only welcome would be condescension," Guermann said. "How is it possible that you, you whose sensibility is so exquisite—as fine and sensitive as a woman's—how could you bear, day after day—"

"Ah, there we have it!" interrupted Ewald, laughing. "The coarse pleasures of the tavern, the rough contact with my uncultivated friends, isn't that it? What can you expect, Guermann! When I've spent the whole day working hard, in deep dialogue with the Muse, my nerves need a rest; I need

to wash my weary spirit in the free-flowing waters of the material world. The tavern is necessary to restore balance to my being. I bring to it—I won't hide that fact from you—enough superiority to placate my hidden pride. Whatever's left of vanity, jealousy, maybe of suffering in me, I stuff into my pipe. Bit by bit I watch my worries rise up, swirl around, and evaporate, go spiraling happily into thin air—like this, look!" And he inhaled deeply on his pipe. Then, between long pauses, he let the smoke slip slowly through his fine, pink lips while making all kinds of playful designs with it.

"You're a wise man," Guermann said with a sigh.

"Well, anyway, I didn't have to go far to find wisdom," Ewald said. "I didn't have to cross oceans. I haven't consulted the Egyptian sphinx, Parthenon echoes, or Colosseum ruins. I didn't meditate on Buddha, Confucius, or Pythagoras. All my knowledge and doctrine are summarized in one precept carved right here on the lid of my pipe bowl—"

And he showed Guermann, who couldn't help smiling, the Italian motto:

Fumo di gloria non vale fumo di pipa.

Guermann listened to these discussions and others like them with mixed emotions. While acknowledging the clear thinking, the simple and strong philosophy of his young friend, he also pitied such undistinguished wisdom and felt almost disdainful of so conventional a resignation. About this time the grand duke returned. But at T___ Guermann didn't find the duke to be the way he had been in Milan. Perhaps in Italy, land of Raphael and Leo X, the ruler's nature had been warmed by that culture's relaxed manner and appreciation for beauty, which had fostered a sense of equality; perhaps his courtesans' intrigues and the grand duchess's precautions had influenced his thinking. The fact remains that he behaved politely, nothing more. After an official visit to the atelier and an invitation to dine with subordinates, he gave Guermann no further signs of life.

What a contrast, for the vain and emotionally hungry artist, between the brilliant life of Milan and this monotonous existence, faced with work that was slow, bristling with problems, and whose results seemed extremely unpromising. Solitude is good only for the strong. Guermann's was taken over by malevolent forces. Ewald's presence, which had given him temporary relief, began to feel unwelcome. The advice he'd been forced to take, the relationship of subordination he felt toward a younger man who still saw himself as a student, cast him so far away from the artistic sovereignty to which he felt automatically entitled that he agonizingly wondered several times if he were made of nothing but delusions in thinking himself called to a glorious future, and if he might have done better—. Here, countless plans, each more quixotic than the other, assaulted his mind. Horrific nightmares left him panting through entire nights. His nerves became so raw that even physical labor was painful. Bewildered by these delays, he had an enormous scaffolding built at the museum and had already gone there twice, determined finally to begin the daunting fresco. Twice his courage had failed. After running ladders and boards in all directions, he returned home in despair. Once so robust, his health grew steadily weaker. A kind of childlike terror at the sight of a human face quickly took over him as he imagined reproach or mockery in every eye. He abruptly closed his atelier door to Ewald. The latter accepted the situation with sadness. Then Guermann, unable to hold a paintbrush, unable to throw off the inner weight that suffocated him, spent entire days with his head in his hands, crying bitterly. In that state of desperation, Nelida's memory resumed its absolute dominion. Superstitious pangs of guilt clutched his heart. In his self doubt and the collapse of his talent, he thought he was seeing punishment for his mistakes. And, since the hastiest conclusions and most extreme positions had always attracted him irresistibly, two months to the day after he left Milan,

Guermann wrote Nelida a letter that only too clearly betrayed his incoherent thoughts:

> *Nelida, Nelida! Let me repeat that holy name a hundred, a thousand times! It weighs on me, burns me, today it tears me apart: But, if you're willing, it can still have its former magic power over me.*
>
> *Come—please come to me! Don't waste an hour, even a minute. Come to my arms, weak with reaching out for your spirit; come press against my breast, which can no longer hold back its moans!*
>
> *Oh, Nelida! What mysteries of grandeur and love I'll once again show you! My mind is so powerful it's crushing me. I can't bear it alone anymore. Inside me is a whole world wanting to be born out of chaos. Your look—I feel it—can separate the light from the shadows.*
>
> *I can't fly to you. Honor keeps me here. I'm waiting for you—and dying of impatience and love!*

This letter never reached its destination. Nelida had left Italy. No one knew where she had gone. Three weeks went by, three weeks during which Guermann lived in a terrifying mental fixation. At every sound of a carriage in the palace courtyard, every sound of a step on the stairs, he jerked awake, starting in his chair, running to the door or window. Then he returned to his seat again and to the circle his dark thoughts had run a thousand times before.

One morning he had barely gotten up when, through one of the many inconsistencies of his inexplicable nature, he had knelt down and ardently asked heaven for Nelida's quick return because he felt his life being used up and was afraid, when a valet entered in great haste, bearing news that a young lady had just arrived at the Emperor Hotel and wanted to see him immediately.

"Nelida!" Guermann cried. He rushed from the room so quickly that the valet, who didn't even try to follow him, began chatting with the servant washing the stairs, telling

her his important message and describing with gusto the handsome horse and carriage belonging to the beautiful lady from Italy and the superb ground-floor apartment she had straightaway rented for six months.

In a flash Guermann was at the Emperor Hotel. A maid saw him from a distance. They were expecting him because, just as the apartment door opened, a woman's arms flew around his neck and a passionate mouth burned his cheek. Guermann let himself sink to the floor, shocked by the dark radiance cast over him by the blazing, black eyes of Elisa Zepponi.

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XXVII

The evening was serene. A few pale and trembling stars shone in a sky still awash with the last fires of sunset. Flowering lilacs scented the air. Hidden in the pink branches of a Judas tree, a nightingale stirred the air with the tender, urgent notes of its amorous song. Leaning over the great wall of a wide terrace that overlooked the city, Mother Saint Elizabeth, her eyes fixed on the wide horizon, talked with Ferez.

"You shouldn't doubt," said the nun in her serious and inspirational way, "the triumph of good in this great soul. On her own she made the strong and wise decision to resume the management of her fortune, return to Brittany, and put her assets to work, at least to some extent, with plans we hardly dared dream six months ago. She accepts the hardships ahead of her, in those places so filled with her past, as a final expiation. Claudine's husband is coming to take her to Kervaens. She made me promise to join her, and I told her you'd come too. You owe us your advice and help."

"Premature!" Ferez said, shaking his head disapprovingly. "It's easy to see you've never felt the heart's frailties. You're leaving this woman, who's hardly recovered yet, vulnerable to her most destructive memories!"

"There aren't any more dangers for my holy child," the nun exclaimed. "Her will is steadfast, her mind emancipated. We won't see her fall to the sad extremes of weak hearts who can't save themselves from love except by hate, from ecstasy except by despair. She has a calm respect for the past because she has unwavering faith in the future. She talks about her love like a poet and about her mistakes like a

philosopher. Her soul, like an Alpine glacier, has quietly done its inner, invisible work. Relying on her own strength and without being pushed, she has rejected all the alien elements that tarnished her natural purity."

Mother Saint Elizabeth talked much more about Nelida, who was her steady obsession and her dearest care. Ferez didn't interrupt again. Glancing back at him, she suddenly noticed that he had slipped into a deep reverie and didn't seem to be hearing her.

"So, what are you thinking about?" she asked him.

He smiled gently, and, looking at her steadily with a mixture of love and reproach: "You're quite eloquent, Faustine," he said, calling her by her first name for the first time, "but look! That nightingale, singing over there in the young branches, is even more eloquent than you are. For the past quarter-hour it's been lifting me beyond all present realities and carrying me on the wings of its happy song to the world of dreams and memories. Do you know where I was a minute ago when you pulled me out of my daydream? Do you remember one evening—it was ten years ago—midnight had struck. We were alone in your room. Still wearing your formal gown, you, like a studious child, had me called so you could read me a serious historical study. Through a whim I chose not to oppose, you said you wanted to test your eyes' strength by reading in moonlight, and you'd hidden the lamp behind the screen. I leaned on the balcony of the window. Like today, the lilacs were blooming in your father's garden, and the dome of the sky was scattered with stars. Serious and calm, you started to read. Like today, I wasn't listening. My dazzled eyes were following the precise movement of your muselike lips, and I was contemplating the beautiful, bare arm supporting your bowed forehead. All of a sudden, yielding to an overwhelming force, I felt my knees give way. Through an involuntary act, I found myself in adoration before you. You were still reading and didn't see me. After a while, your tired eyes turned away: 'I can't

see at all anymore,' you said, closing the notebook. Then, noticing me at your knees, you uttered something in surprise. I grabbed your hand; my own was burning. 'What can you read on that dead page?' I cried out. 'Faustine, read my heart. Read the secrets of life, the secrets of love *there*.' You looked directly at me with no anger in your face. I was silent, horrified by what I'd said, what you were going to say. You said nothing. After a moment, I saw—thought I saw—tears in your eyes. 'Thank you,' I stammered, and fled, not glancing back, afraid some word from you would take it back—those tears, the first and only I've seen you shed. Oh, Faustine, Faustine—if only you had loved me—

"But what were you saying a minute ago?" Ferez went on, indifferent, his voice expressionless. "Madame de Kervaens is leaving for Brittany?"

"Tomorrow," answered Mother Saint Elizabeth, drawing her wool scarf closer and crossing it over her chest. "But it's getting chilly and damp. Let's go back." And she walked in her regal way toward the house engulfed in darkness, looking up at the high window where, behind a muslin curtain, Nelida's solitary lamp was burning.

During this conversation, Nelida was completing instructions she had been giving for her upcoming departure. When she least expected it, her door opened and she saw Monsieur Bernard enter.

"Welcome!" she exclaimed, running to him. "I'm waiting for you—ready—my last campaign done; I'm eager to leave."

Monsieur Bernard's pale face, the profound change in his features, horrified her.

"My God!" she cried, "What is it? Has something terrible happened? Claudine—?"

"Claudine is fine," Monsieur Bernard said, leading Nelida back to her armchair and forcing her to sit down. "But gather up all your strength, madame. A new test has been reserved for you."

"Good heavens!" Nelida exclaimed, hiding her face in both hands. "Again!"

"God's hand has weighed down on the one you loved, madame. For a month he's been gravely ill—"

"Where is he? Take me to him. Let's hurry," Nelida said, looking distractedly over her shoulder for her travel coat.

"Madame," Monsieur Bernard said, with the composure that never left him, "my coach is downstairs, and I'm at your service. But it's my duty to make you consider what you're about to do. The journey is long. According to the details I've been given, there's very little hope—"

"Let's go!" Nelida said.

"It's doubtful he'll know you," Monsieur Bernard continued, "and I must also warn you that you'll find another woman at his bedside."

"If all the demons of hell were surrounding him—" Nelida cried out, "I would go!"

"Don't you want to say good-bye to your friend?" asked Monsieur Bernard.

"That kind of courage I don't have," Nelida answered, bowing her head. "Let's leave without anyone seeing us. I don't know where I'm going, I don't know what I'm doing. I don't know if it's a duty I'm performing or another mistake I'm making. But this isn't the time to deliberate. Let's go!"

XXVIII

In coming to find Guermann, the Marquise Zepponi had followed the impulse of her unreflective nature. Her lively fancy, aggravated by absence, had assumed the qualities of a passion—an Italian passion—more ardent than proud, not letting itself be discouraged by Guermann's clumsy welcome or even held back by the unmistakable signs of his indifference. Vain men hold easy women in supreme contempt. After the first days of explanations and quarrels, which had revived him slightly by giving him a chance to talk about Nelida, Guermann had fallen once again into self-absorption. And because Elisa's worries, questions, and tears irritated him, he not only no longer appeared at her apartment, he even deserted the atelier where she hadn't hesitated to come find him. He began going into the woods, spending entire days and occasionally nights wandering its paths.

Such odd behavior couldn't go unnoticed in a city as small as T___. It was enlarged upon, amplified in such a way that soon the illustrious artist was regarded as a complete madman. Alarm gradually spread. The supervisor of concerts persuaded the grand duchess that it would be extremely risky for her and her children to continue lodging an insane man on the palace grounds, a man who at any moment might turn on them in fury.

Warned of what was about to happen, the Marquise Zepponi rented a country house at the city gates. She told Guermann it was incumbent on his honor to leave the palace, since he had practically renounced his work. Through all kinds of small ruses, she succeeded in getting him to

live with her for several weeks in the open air, far from the uproar.

At first Guermann seemed to be doing well with this change in location. His disposition improved. He accepted the marquise's genuinely tender attentions with less fierceness. However, his more and more obvious thinness, his long, willful silences punctuated by strange bursts of laughter, his total lack of appetite and sleep caused the doctor, who kept close watch over him, to become seriously concerned. Spring's return only aggravated his illness. His fever became chronic. Fits of delirium brought dread to the marquise's heart. As the danger heightened, so did her devotion. Day and night she kept watch at Guermann's bedside, enduring his bitter words with a resignation not native to her. As obtuse as women of pleasure can be in spiritual pain, which horrifies them, they are to an equal degree charitable and compassionate in physical illness.

To assist the doctor more efficiently in treating a disease that manifested such inexplicable symptoms, Elisa had told him what she knew of Guermann's past. She was astonished to see him immediately struck by the fact that a fixed idea, a profound regret could have caused a state of suffering for which science had no cure. The constant obsession with Nelida explained a number of things he hadn't been able to understand. He told the marquise unequivocally that the presence of so cherished a person might yet, but only might, lead to a fortuitous emotional cleansing to save the sick man. Without hesitating, Elisa decided, heroically for a jealous woman, to write Monsieur Bernard and implore him to bring her rival. The effect of this letter on Nelida has been noted. The span between the day the marquise wrote and the moment a response could be expected was filled with anguish. Sinking into a willful silence, Guermann no longer seemed to recognize those who came near him. They persuaded him with great difficulty to drink liquids that barely kept him alive. Exhaustion made rapid progress. In

terror, Elisa read in the eyes of the doctor, whom she no longer dared to question, the almost certain conviction of approaching death.

One evening, more weary, more worn down than usual, having for a moment moved away from the dozing patient, she had opened a window in the adjacent room and was breathing the field's cool breeze with a burning breast. Silence was everywhere, inside and out. Pale, unkempt, a large shawl over her bare shoulders, Elisa was looking aimlessly into the countryside when the distant sound of wheels on the stony road made her tremble. The sound drew closer. Soon she saw, through the acacia branches in the garden that were just beginning to sprout leaves, a carriage stop at the little green door. The iron key turned with a creak in the keyhole. The door opened. Elisa uttered a cry on seeing, outlined in the shadow and coming through the rose walkway that led directly to the stairs, the white form of Madame de Kervaens leaning on Monsieur Bernard. She put both hands over her heart, beating with frightening speed, and rushed out of the room.

What a meeting! And what sinister games fate plays! For the second time, it brought these two women together, destined to suffer at each other's hands, destined to suffer together. The first time, in a splendid, celebrative setting, they had held out hands that trembled with jealousy. They had exchanged looks of defiance still sparkling with youthful presumption. Today, two steps from a dying person, both so pale they could have passed for ghosts, their hands seek one another in an embrace that misfortune makes sincere. Their eyes meet without hatred. Now, no spark gleams: the same terror fills them with fear; the same fate crushes them.

Without a word, Elisa drew Nelida to a stone bench lining the walk. There, in a halting voice, through a flood of tears, she told her about Guermann's condition. "Save him! Save him!" she cried, fixing her large, wild eyes on Nelida. "Only you can keep him from dying!"

And the poor woman, humble and superstitious, incapable of containing the chaos of her spirits, begged Nelida's pardon, making a vow to enter the cloister—surrendering herself, finally, to all the excesses of desperate passion.

Accustomed to controlling her pain, Nelida gently squeezed the marquise's hands and urged her to be calm. Then, leaving her to the arm of Monsieur Bernard, she moved toward the house.

Her instinct led her straight to the patient's bedroom. The carefully closed curtains let in only a faint light. She came to Guermann's bed without being seen. Glancing down, she had trouble recognizing him, suffering had so altered his features. His hair, which he had let grow for several months, fell in long black bands across his sunken cheeks, making them glow with a ghostly pallor. His mouth was compressed, the symmetry of his handsome face destroyed. Bending over her lover's bed, holding back the tears that suffocated her, Nelida directed to his eyes, which were lost in the emptiness, a look that focused all her love and all her will. The sick man shuddered, jerked abruptly, and, lifting himself to a sitting position, at first looked around, then rested his gaze for a long time on Nelida, as if on something he was trying to remember. She lowered her eyes and remained still to give him time to gather his faculties. That moment lasted forever! When she raised her eyes, she met those of her lover, this time no longer dazed and vague, but fixed on her and shining with an inner light.

"Nelida!" Guermann murmured. A long silence followed his exclamation.

"Nelida!" he said again with a muffled moan. She wanted to speak; fear sealed her lips.

"You're so beautiful!" Guermann said, as his hand moved to find Nelida's. Whatever love remained in Guermann's heart, whatever forgiveness in Nelida's soul, was exchanged in this consummate touch.

After several minutes: "Oh, yes, yes—you're beautiful, and you're good," he murmured. "I called you. You heard

me, and you came—oh—I love you so much!" Tears streamed down his face. "But it's too late—"

Nelida could hold back no longer. She threw herself in Guermann's arms and gathered, with a lover's kiss, his bitter tears.

At that moment the doctor and Ewald, who had not let a day go by without coming to see Guermann, entered the room. At the sound of the door opening, Nelida pulled herself out of her lover's arms, which were holding her with convulsive force.

He cast a dark look on those entering.

"Leave me alone!" he cried out in a voice suddenly imperious and vibrant again. "I want to die in peace. Leave me with my final dream!"

They left him.

"Nelida," Guermann continued in a wrenching tone. "You forgive everything, don't you?"

"What's there to forgive?" she said, her trembling hand drying the cold sweat on Guermann's forehead. "Forget the past. Live—"

"Why live? Life is bitter," he said.

"Live for your work, for your honor, for your glory—"

"Ah, you don't love me any more," he said, interrupting her with a pained smile. "You aren't telling me to live for our love." Then, after a moment of silence: "It was so beautiful, so pure, so deep, and so splendid—your love! From the day I left you, I left—and never found again—my virtue, my rest, my happiness, my genius."

"You'll get everything back," Nelida said.

"I just did, since you came back to me," he said, looking at her as if he were in ecstasy. "Your hand, on my forehead, takes the dark thoughts away. Your breath cleans the air I breathe that just a few moments ago was burning my chest. Your words are an indescribable melody to my ears—"

He fell back exhausted from the intense emotion. His eyes closed. Nelida thought he sighed for the last time. At her cries, the doctor, who had stayed in the adjacent room, rushed in.

After taking Guermann's pulse, he motioned to Monsieur Bernard, who had followed him in, to lead Nelida out of the room.

Guermann lived two more days without regaining consciousness. His final moments were quiet and peaceful. His suffering seemed to have ended.

It might be hoped that the last touch of a waiting hand, the last glance of supreme love were, for this panting soul, a guarantee of eternal peace. Nelida could believe, at least at his hour of death, that she had been for her lover what she wanted to be in his life: the answered prayer, the forgiven sin, Beatrice showing the heavens unfold.

Epilogue

What happened to Nelida? If the reader is interested enough in this courageous woman to want to know what came after her time of trial; if one wants to learn what kind of maturity follows such a youth, what kind of evening such a morning; if one asks at which harbor here on earth souls like this find rest, we'll perhaps tell these things on her behalf—but shouldn't the reader have already guessed?

Among the most highly gifted women, the heart with its quick passions so far outpaces thought that it acts alone—submitting, overturning, and pulling in all directions the entire first half of existence. Slower in its movement, thought grows, at first unperceived, in the eye of the storm. But little by little it rises above these others, knows them, judges them, condemns, or absolves them. It becomes sovereign. For Nelida the battle was long and cruel, and when she gained possession of the strengths nature had given her, she found herself in the presence of external enemies as formidable as her love had been. The fight began again in a new form and another arena. What was the result and the reward? It's only too easy to guess.

Don't we belong to a time in which nothing is achieved, no one completes any task? Don't human beings and things today seem struck by some sort of ironic curse? Don't we see around us every passion gone astray, every strength dissipated, every will engulfed by the dark torment of our uncertainty?

Only a few, and Nelida is one of them, despite everything, unyieldingly repeat in the greatest outer darkness the Psalmist's holy word, that desperate hope of noble hearts: *Whatever may be—God is good!*

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